

Sunday August 4, 2024 / August 11, 2024

**Lesson 2: Follow Me, Let the Dead Bury the Dead (Matt 8:18-27; Luke 9:57-62)**

The second recorded instance in the Gospels where Jesus uttered the words “Follow Me” as a command can be found in Matthew 8:18-27 (Luke 9:57-62). This is the instance where Jesus was approached by a disciple who sought His permission to ‘bury his father’ first before he commits to following Jesus.

This episode highlights the different types of followers that are drawn to Jesus in His early Galilean ministry. Many of these early followers of Christ fall short in their understanding for what it means to follow Him, while others who were true followers needed to work on their faith journey and experience Christ personally.

Before getting into the analysis, let’s continue to monitor the activities of Jesus leading into this episode.

**Timeline – Tracking the Public Ministry of Jesus**

The Gospels of Matthew and Mark informed us that Jesus’ public ministry formally began after the arrest of John the Baptist (Matt 4:12; Mk 1:14). The early part of His public ministry happened in Galilee, starting in Capernaum where He recruited His first disciples to join His ministry team (Matt 4:18-22; Mk 1:16-20).

The Gospel of John informed us that Jesus’ public ministry lasted three years by identifying the four Jewish Passover observances during His public ministry (Jn 2:13; 5:1; 6:4; 12:1; 13:1 cf Matt 26:2). The first Passover recorded by John occurred just before His public ministry began (Jn 2:13). The last Passover recorded by John coincides with the events of His crucifixion (Jn 19:14). Continuing to track Jesus’ movements through the four Gospels since He recruited His ministry team, we can identify the following (Use the map on the last page to track the movements):

- [A] – Jesus’ early public ministry was conducted in the Galilean Region (Matt 4:23)
  - People who heard about Jesus came from Decapolis, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan (Matt 4:25)
- [B] – Jesus goes to Jerusalem to participate in Passover observances (Jn 5:1), which happened on a Sabbath day (Jn 5:9)
  - He healed a man by the Pool of Bethesda on a Sabbath day (Jn 5:2-9)
- [C] – Jesus returns to Galilee, continued His ministry in the Galilean region; preaches the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) near Capernaum (Matt 8:5)
  - He healed a man with leprosy (Matt 8:2-4)
  - He healed a servant of a Centurion (Matt 8:5-13)
- [D] – Jesus goes to Peter’s house in Bethsaida (Matt 8:14 cf Jn 1:44). Note: Bethsaida means “house of the fishermen” and is the hometown of Philip, Peter, Andrew, and other fishermen (Jn 1:44).
  - He healed Peter’s mother-in-law (Matt 8:15)
  - He continues His ministry of healing from Peter’s house (Matt 8:16-17)
- [E] – Jesus gave orders to cross over to the other side of the sea when the crowd at Peter’s home became too large (Matt 8:18). “The other side of the sea” is the countryside of Gadara (Matt 8:28).

From the timeline, we can deduce that this second “Follow Me” episode in the Gospels occurred during the second year of Jesus’ public ministry outside of Bethsaida as the disciples are about to cross the Sea of Galilee towards Gadara. The context for this second “Follow Me” episode leads to four Biblical principles identified by the four types of followers drawn to Him in His early Galilean ministry.

**Context – Leaving the crowd to cross the sea...**

Matthew 8:18 informed us that when Jesus saw the crowd gathering around Him, He gave orders to cross to the other side of the sea. Question to ponder is, what was the rationale? If Jesus’ ministry is to the people, why was this necessary? The answer to these questions has to do with the dynamics of this crowd – who they are, and what do we know about them. This is the first type of followers identified by Matthew related to this “Follow Me” episode: **The Fan Base Followers.**

This crowd is very likely the ones who followed Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 8:1). By the time Jesus settled in Bethsaida, this crowd likely has increased in size by word of mouth. It is therefore worthwhile to explore what was likely said about Jesus that led to the crowd size increasing, and descending upon

Bethsaida. From Matthew's account, we can identify some of these possible word-of-mouth narratives:

- They like His teaching (Matt 7:28)
- They sought His healing powers (Matt 4:24, 8:2,5-6, cf Matt 4:24)
- They followed others in the crowd, but was not listening to His message (Matt 8:10-12)

Effectively, this crowd is more of a fan base than followers. They were attracted to Jesus or the things said about Jesus, seeing Him more as a star or a popular figure because of His teaching and/or healing abilities. They were not coming to know Jesus or to learn about the Kingdom Message He is preaching. They were coming, basically, as fans. This is not what Jesus wanted. He wasn't trying to attract a crowd or build a fan base. He wants to attract followers. His expectation for His true followers is for them to know Him, and to explore their faith in Him (Matt 8:2-4; 10-12). He even hinted at this point in His response about the centurion, speaking to the audience around Him about the centurion's faith while implying how that audience is not pursuing Him or faith in Him like the centurion, and how they are ignoring the Kingdom message. This is also why Jesus told the man healed from leprosy not to tell others about His healed condition (Matt 8:4), because He knew that many are following the crowd for the wrong reasons. It is worth noting that the two testimonies about this crowd highlighted by Matthew are two instances where the one seeking Jesus exercised faith in Jesus.

Fan bases, especially those of the bandwagon variety, follows a crowd towards a popular figure with an expectation to be pleased or entertained. Their focus is on what they want, and the demand is for whichever entity that is the object of the fan base – in this case, Jesus – to satisfy what the fan base wants (cf Lk 17:11-19; Jn 6:60-66). This is not what Jesus wants as followers. Moreover, it was draining energy and resources from Jesus that can be used to attract true followers. Hence, the command by Jesus to leave this crowd.

This then leads to the first Biblical principle observed in this episode:

Following Jesus – as a disciple – is an exercise in pursuit of Christ, not an exercise in pursuit of what is famous or popular.

### **Context – Foxes have dens and birds have nests...**

Matthew 8:19 then informed us of a pledge made by a scribe to Jesus, saying that he will follow Jesus wherever He goes. Jesus' response to the scribe's request can be viewed as a form of passive-aggressive rebuke (Matt 8:20). This leads to the second type of followers identified by Matthew related to this "Follow Me" episode: **The Scribes (the Educated)**

Scribes in the first century were educated men whose profession is to study the Torah, transcribe it, write commentaries about it, then teach it. They were often regarded as 'teachers of the Law' because that is their physical interaction with the general public. Their industry was born roughly around the time of Ezra when the second temple was dedicated (cf Ezra 7:6). They are effectively biblical scholars or paralegals in our modern-day correlation.

For scribes in those days, their lifestyle is characterized by seeking knowledge and enhancing their skill in presenting that knowledge. This necessarily means that they need some form of structured setting – both time and location -- for them to meditate on their knowledge, debate their knowledge, and teach their knowledge. Hence, they would normally live on some form of set schedule ("office hours" in our modern-day correlation) in or around buildings designated for knowledge exploration (college or universities in our modern-day correlation).

For scribes in those days, if they are young and ambitious, being able to associate themselves to a popular Rabbi is effectively a career maker. Given how popular Jesus was at this point, being able to say "I am a disciple of Jesus" can greatly benefit this scribe's career. Note also how this scribe addressed Jesus as "teacher" rather than "Lord" like the two positive testimonies that Matthew cited (Matt 8:19; cf 8:2,6). This demeanor combined with a scribe's background would indicate that this scribe was seeking to benefit personally from the popularity of Jesus, asking to effectively be Jesus' apprentice, rather than to be a follower of Jesus.

In response, Jesus basically told this scribe that He is not looking for an apprentice. He is looking for followers. In His one verse response, Jesus described everything that is wrong with the ‘scribe-type’ of followers in those days – “Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Matt 8:20). The office hours and buildings where scribes spent most of their time are the “holes” and “nest” alluded to in Jesus’ response. Jesus do not want followers who spends most of their time in a classroom or church or home setting studying Scripture and teaching Scripture. He doesn’t want followers to only be followers on certain time or certain days. This is the lifestyle of the scribes; and this lifestyle created this sheltered space where they operate (“holes” and “nest”). This lifestyle does not meet the expectation that Jesus wants in His followers.

The motive of this scribe – and possibly a common motive shared by all scribes in those days – is to have an association with Jesus (or some famous or influential teacher) for personal gain. This also does not meet Jesus’ expectation for His followers. He does not want followers who say they “go to church” (i.e., association with Jesus) for friendship, for social gatherings, for personal edification, for their children, for their parents, etc. He wants followers who will be a testimony everywhere, all day, every day. This is what He means by “...no place to lay His head;” no sheltered space, no “fixed location” to practice Christianity. He expects His followers to get out from their comfort settings and be a testimony out in the world.

This leads to the second Biblical principle observed in this episode:

Following Jesus – as a disciple – is to live our faith in Christ in the world, not to live by association to Christ sheltered from the world.

### **Context – Let the Dead Bury the Dead...**

Matthew 8:21 informed us of yet another type of followers that falls short of meeting Jesus’ expectation. This time, it was a man who chooses to weigh following Jesus against other choices in his life. Luke 9:59-62 provided additional insights to this type of follower: **The Undecided.**

Both Matthew and Luke identified these followers as “another disciple,” which indicates that both have likely been following Jesus for some time. This being the case, the first of these disciples wanted Jesus’ permission to first go bury his father before committing to follow Jesus (Matt 8:21; Lk 9:59). The phrase “bury my father” in those days could be taken literally (father had died very recently, so the man will need to prepare funeral arrangements) or a reference to the need to care for someone either at an advanced age or near death due to other reasons. Given that this individual was a disciple (i.e., has been following Jesus for some time), this context suggests that the latter scenario would be more likely. His father was likely at an advanced age, sits at home and is currently being cared for by other family members or possibly servants. His motivation for wanting to be there by his father’s side as his father declines towards death likely has to do with receiving his inheritance before his father passes. This individual is effectively saying to Jesus that he is not yet ready to follow Jesus; not until he gets his worldly priorities settled.

Jesus’ response – to let the dead bury the dead (Matt 8:22) – is an acknowledgment that there must have been somebody at home taking care of his father at that time for him to be with Jesus at all these rallies and events. Those individuals with his father were likely there with the same motive as this disciple – waiting to hear about, to influence and receive the inheritance. They’d already made up their mind that waiting for the inheritance was more important than the coming Kingdom. In effect, they have already rejected Christ in favor of worldly gains. This individual, however, the fact that he is here with Jesus shows his indecisiveness in being caught between two life priorities. Jesus is trying to help him choose, telling him to choose life. Let the ones who’ve rejected life (rejected Christ) bury his dying father, and “Follow Me.”

Luke expounded on this principle by citing a second disciple with a similar request, asking Jesus for permission to first go say goodbye to his family (Lk 9:61). Though his intention seemed noble and reasonable, his heart betrayed him as Jesus was able to see what he was thinking. Jesus’ response informs us of this man’s motivation – he struggles to let go of what he already has (Lk 9:62 cf 1 Kings 19:19-21). There is a good chance that he won’t be coming back to follow Jesus.

Whereas the first disciple’s indecisiveness has to do with balancing life priorities against following Jesus, the second disciple’s indecisiveness has to do with balancing life’s luxury or personal worldly assets against

following Jesus. In both cases, the issue is about prioritizing following Jesus against worldly gains and worldly values. This leads to the third Biblical principle observed in this episode:

Following Jesus – as a disciple – prioritizes life in Christ above all other life issues, rather than to manage discipleship among life's other challenges.

### **Context – Disciples with Jesus in the storm...**

The final type of followers related to this “Follow Me” episode is the small band of disciples who got into the boat with Jesus as they head towards Gadara (Matt 8:23-27; Lk 8:22-25). Neither Matthew nor Luke recorded how many of Jesus’ disciples got into this boat with Him, nor did they mention the size of the boat. However, it is safe to assume that this is a smaller group that is closest to Jesus at this point in His ministry. This type of followers can be described as: **The Trainees.**

A notable characteristic of being trainees in general in any context is that they do not yet know everything about what they are supposed to be or supposed to do. A common and effective strategy to break in trainees is to use an “on-the-job training” approach. This is effectively what Jesus is doing with this group of disciples. The focus of the training exercise in this case is on developing and strengthening their faith in Christ – a common theme leading into this “Follow Me” episode.

Both Matthew and Luke records that this small band of disciples got into the boat with Jesus. Both accounts also record that Jesus went to sleep, indicating that this is likely not a short 20-minute or less journey. Sometime during this journey, a violent storm developed that battered this boat (Matt 8:24). Due to the geographic layout surrounding the Sea of Galilee with its various mountain terrains, random burst of violent storms was evidently a common occurrence in those days, and still true today. These disciples would have known about this given that they were fishermen in that region, from a town of fishermen. Sailing across this sea for various purposes to various destinations and encountering storms during the travels would not have been something new for these disciples.

In this particular instance, the disciples were either ill-equipped to handle this sudden storm, or the storm was unusually strong and overwhelmed the disciples – or both. Whatever the cause may be, the disciples knew that they were in trouble. It seemed evident that they had intended to let Jesus rest, but recognizing how their worldly skills as professionals at handling rough waters at sea was not able to save them, they resorted to waking Jesus and pleading for His help save them (Matt 8:25).

The training lesson here is evident. These disciples at this point had heard Jesus’ powerful preaching and have seen His ability to heal diseases and sicknesses. For context, teaching professionals and medical professionals in those days might also be able to perform similar tasks, though not as proficient or effective as Jesus, and certainly not as \$cheap. Those who chose not to follow Jesus **\*\*could\*\*** make this argument that Jesus is merely another good teacher, or another good doctor. In effect, for these disciples, their faith in Christ is a work in progress. Knowing what Jesus can do versus experiencing who Jesus truly is are two completely different exercises in their faith journey. Jesus wants to take their faith journey to another level by letting them experience Him in a life and death situation. In time, He will teach them about parables.

Matthew records the disciples’ faith strengthening exercise from knowing Jesus to experiencing Jesus (Matt 8:27). This leads to the final Biblical principle observed in this episode:

Following Jesus – as a disciple – is a faith in training exercise, experiencing Christ in the storms of our life

### **Analysis and Application: Misconceptions about being Christians**

The four types of followers observed in this “Follow Me” episode can equally be viewed upon as the four misconceptions about being Christians in our modern-day context. Much of these misconceptions are rooted in the world’s influence to define Christianity by worldly standards for worldly acceptance, not by Jesus’ standards accepted by Jesus. With this understanding, the following application principles can be observed:

- **Being a Follower is more than just being with Followers** – Too many people today equate being part of a church to be the same as being followers of Christ. They come to church and participate in

activities with other believers either because they like the pastors' message, or they like the fellowship group. But they are unwilling to commit and unwilling to accept Jesus. They are not the type of followers Jesus expects, and not considered part of His Body, even if they are members of the church.

- **Being a Follower is more than just knowledge of Scripture** – Scripture knowledge is an important part of discipleship. But Scripture knowledge of itself is not discipleship. Discipleship's emphasis is on living out the Gospel as the goal, not knowledge of Scripture. This is what the scribes and the educated failed to understand and is also a fallacy for many of today's discipleship training programs. Jesus expects His followers to get out of their "holes" and "nest" and be Christians in the world, not in the church, and also, not only on Sundays.
- **Being a Follower is more important than managing priorities in life** – Too many people today make excuses to delay their commitment to follow Jesus believing that this key decision that impacts their eternity can wait. They prioritize the need to have a stable career, stable income, start a family, or other life necessities before they are willing to follow Jesus. What they fail to understand is that tomorrow may never come for them to achieve those worldly necessities. This means that they may never get that opportunity to commit later. This is Jesus' message to the undecided.
- **Being a Follower is more than just believing in Christ** – Many Christians today have a wrong understanding that once they accepted Christ and have their salvation secured, they can thus live out their life as if nothing has changed. This fallacy is debunked by Paul in Romans chapters 6-8. Jesus Himself demonstrated with His disciples that following Him is a faith journey that will intensify until their journey is complete.

#### Reflecting Upon the Word

Read Matthew 8:1-34 with a focus on being Jesus' disciples and what Jesus is trying to show His disciples.

1. After preaching the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus demonstrated His authority over many aspects of reality for the disciples to observe as part of their faith training experience. Identify all the categories observed in this chapter.
2. When Jesus calmed the storm, Matthew noted that the disciples were amazed (Matt 8:26). However, His other acts were not met with amazement, including the conversation with demons and the casting out of demons (Matt 8:28-34). Why is this so?
3. When Jesus cast the demons out of the two demon-possessed men, the whole city came out and pleaded for Him to leave (Matt 8:34). Contrast this reaction with those who brought demon-possessed men to Jesus to be healed (Matt 8:16). Why did the city react this way?

#### Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

The four types of followers in this study can be viewed as misconceptions about being followers. They can equally be viewed as four stages towards being true followers of Christ in our personal spiritual journey. Reflect on your spiritual journey to see if you've experience these stages. Document your reflection in testimonial form by considering these points:

1. Did you ever experience the fan-base stage where you were drawn by the crowd or by a pastor's message to join a church, or drawn by the benefits of a church's program that led you to join the church? What were the conditions?
2. Did you ever experience the scribe stage where you thought being a Christian meant spending more time studying or teaching Scripture in a private setting? When did you realized the misunderstanding?
3. Did you ever experience the undecided stage where for every opportunity to follow Jesus now – in any aspect of ministry, you find ten reasons to wait and postpone your commitment?
4. Have you ever experienced Jesus personally in a life-impacting circumstance that dramatically change your views about being a Christian?

Be prepared to share your testimony to any future followers of Christ who may be struggling in their spiritual walk.



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