

Discipleship's Demands  
Matthew 8:18-22

Please turn in your Bible's to Matthew 8. (Park story)

To understand what Jesus' demands are, we need to understand what discipleship was in the first century, and even more than that what a disciple is. The word for disciple in the New Testament is the word μαθητης **and it was used of a student, a learner, and disciple**. At the core, a disciple is a learner, someone who learns from another, is a student of another. This was **not a new concept in Jesus' day or the ancient world, nor was it unique among the Jews**. The idea of discipleship had been around for several centuries. The great Greek philosophers, Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato all had disciples, those who would follow them, learn from them, and emulate their way of life. While discipleship as a concept was neither new nor exclusive to the Jews they did develop a highly organized process for discipleship that's helpful for us to understand.

In the first century, discipleship was the apex, the peak and climax, of the Jewish education system. There were three steps along the path. In first century Israel, most every town and city would have a local synagogue present. Synagogue was the center of life for most communities. Synagogue was where the community worshipped, it was also where the community went to school. **Beit Sepher was the entry point of education and means House of the Book**. All Jewish children boys and girls roughly aged 8 to 12/13 went to beit sepher. This would be our equivalent to **grade school, and most finished their educational studies at this level**. At Beit Sepher, Jewish children were **taught to read, to write, and given basic math skills**. In a time in which most people were illiterate, the Jews had always placed a high value of education, and especially education in Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. **Torah was the primary text book and curriculum in Beit Sepher, and by the time students reached age 12/13 they had memorized most if not all of the Torah**. The Jews were steeped in God's word, and realized the precious gift His word was to them. At 12/13 years old, most girls would be getting ready to be married and begin their trades in homemaking as they did in that culture, and most boys went to learn their father's trades: fishing, carpentry, olive pressing to name a few. But among the boys, the ones who showed real aptitude for the text of the Hebrew Bible, the cream of the crop, they would go on to the next level of education, called Bet Midrash.

**Bet Midrash is the House of Learning**. This was for boys aged 13-15, and in this school, occurring in the local Synagogue, and here the study of the Hebrew Bible gained in intensity. At this level, having memorized the Torah, now these boys would **engage in memorizing the rest of the Old Testament**. Of the boys that made it to this level, the majority would be done, going on perhaps to be educators themselves, or again, joining their father's and siblings in the family trade. But for the very best of the best, for those with the passion and skill to endure, they would go on to the final stage of discipleship, **Bet Talmid – the House of Study**.

Bet Talmid would last from age 15-30. These were the elites. The Apostle Paul was one who would have been through Bet Talmid, having studied under the great Rabbi Gamaliel. In Bet Talmid, the student is no longer in Synagogue, but would find a rabbi they wanted to study and learn from, and **would apprentice them self to the Rabbi; they would seek out a rabbi to follow, as the Rabbi to accept them as a follower, and the Rabbi would interview them**, somewhat mercilessly, to determine if this would be student, if this disciple would pass muster. If the would be disciple were accepted by the Rabbi, the disciple would have **three goals: to be with the Rabbi**, they would follow everywhere the Rabbi went; 24/7. **To be like the Rabbi**, they would emulate dress, patterns of speech, style of teaching of their Rabbi. And finally **to do what the Rabbi does**. The goal was to become as much a clone of the Rabbi as they possibly could. And when this was completed, the Rabbi would simply turn to their disciple and say go, make your own disciples.

This is the context for the two men, Matthew introduces us to who come to Jesus asking to be His disciples. (Read Matthew 8:18-22) Two men, come to Jesus, asking to be His disciples. We have scant background information on

these men. We know the first is a scribe, and the second labeled a disciple. But we find in these two would be disciples case studies on the high, and seemingly harsh demands, Jesus puts on those who would seek to follow Him as disciples. The first person Matthew introduces to us is what I'm calling the Overeager Scribe.

A scribe in the Jewish world of the New Testament was an expert in the Law of Moses. In terms of the schooling we discussed a moment ago, they would likely have gone through the second phase of schooling, Bet Midrash, and gained a career in continuing to study all the nuances of the Law, becoming a religious legal expert. Scribes in Matthew's gospel are often aligned with the religious leaders the Pharisees and Sadducees, and typically portrayed as antagonistic to Jesus and His ministry. In Matthew 8:19, the scribe comes and address Jesus as "teacher". This shows the **scribe's understanding of Jesus and discipleship as another academic pursuit**. The Scribe may have been a part of the crowd on the mountain listening to Jesus' sermon, may have seen some of the miracles Jesus performed at the beginning of chapter 8. Whatever the rationale is, the address from the Scribe to Jesus as teacher betrays that for the Scribe, Jesus is a Rabbi he could follow to potentially advance his career.

What the Scribe offers also gives us some insight into his understanding of discipleship. "*Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go*". That sounds pretty committed. Matthew 8:18 says that Jesus gave orders to go to the other side, that is the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and we'll talk about that event next week. So with those orders, the Scribe approaches Jesus and says, you're going to the other side, I'll go with you to the other side, I'll follow you wherever you are departing from. And that's the critical thing we need to understand. While it sounds like the Scribe is giving an open-ended declaration of willingness to follow, the reality is **the Scribe is looking for commitment on his terms**. While the profession the Scribe gives isn't a problem, the reality is he hasn't fully counted the cost of what it will mean to follow Jesus.

Verse 20, Jesus bluntly responds, "*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*" Following Jesus will not lead to comfort, will not lead to riches, will not lead to safety, **following Jesus may cost the most basic security**. Jesus lived a life of austerity, he did not own a home, did not have many material things to call His own. And when we come to follow Jesus He demands that we be willing to give up the most basic securities as well. This isn't something we are very comfortable with in the US, or have had to deal with very much in the US. And I think in many ways that's what makes our churches and our understanding of discipleship so anemic and weak. Jesus calls us to a radical form of discipleship, in which we deny ourselves take up our cross and follow Him. In which we put aside and walk away from the trappings of the world to focus exclusively on Christ and His kingdom. What the Scribe did not understand, what many of us don't want to understand, is that **following Jesus means Gethsemane, following Jesus means Golgatha, following Jesus means the cross, following Jesus means the tomb**. I was floored by this as I was studying this passage and had never made this connection before. Jesus says to the Scribe, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. The word used for lay is κλινω. When Jesus is on the cross, the Apostle John tells us in John 19:30, "*When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, 'It is finished,' and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*" John uses the same word κλινω, lay, to say the Jesus bowed his head, it is on the cross that the Lord Jesus Christ found the resting place He did not have throughout His ministry. If you are looking for safety and security, Jesus says, if you will follow me you may need to abandon both.

If you look in your notes you see that it says excursus. I want to introduce something that we will talk about often in Matthew's gospel. **When Jesus refers to Himself in Matthew's gospel; Son of man, is the most common way Jesus does so**. There's a lot we'll need to say about this so we can understand why Jesus continuously uses it. We might think if Jesus wanted to make no bones about the fact that He was the Messiah, that He was God incarnate on earth He would just simply say it. However, to use Messiah or Son of David or a direct claim to deity would have been confusing. Son of Man was **devoid of all nationalistic and religious overtones** and would not be a confusing title. Jesus could use it freely and shape from it **an ability to speak clearly and directly about His mission**. Since Jesus uses this phrase to refer to Himself nearly 30 times in Matthew's gospel, we'll have ample opportunity to explore.

With no further interaction from the Scribe, Matthew introduces us to a second would be disciple. This second person I'm calling an under-eager disciple. In contrast to the first man who sought to follow Jesus, **this man understands more about commitment to Jesus than the first.** We see this in his address to Jesus as Lord. The second man understands that Jesus is a demanding master, and worthy of the demands He is making using the title Lord as he approaches Jesus. **And this would-be disciple comes to him with a seemingly honorable and reasonable family obligation.** "*Lord, let me first go and bury my father.*" The duty of a son to his parents was very important in this world. The duty to attend to the burial of a parent, particularly a father was so important, that many of the Old Testament Laws would be suspended during the long process of burial and mourning. But, this man's request begs a question. Is your dad deceased, or are you simply wanting to wait to follow until he dies? The phrase this man uses is an idiomatic phrase. Let me go and bury my father was another way of saying, I need to take care of my parents and get my inheritance, then I'll be ready to come and follow you. This under-eager disciple is simply looking to **delay following Jesus until a more convenient time.**

And Jesus' response is again blunt and pointing out the real issues involved, "*Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.*" Friends, if we are going to follow Jesus we need to count the cost that **Jesus is worthy of undivided affection, and that He demands absolute allegiance.** Leaving the dead to bury their own dead is saying, don't let other things get in the way or delay your coming to follow Jesus. If you are going to follow – then follow. Jesus wants this man, and He wants us to understand that **discipleship is an urgent matter; delay is a response of the spiritually dead.** That's what Jesus means when He says let the dead bury the dead; let those who are spiritually dead, preoccupied with the things of this world, deal with the dead. Let the spiritually dead be distracted with what's going on around them – if you want to follow me, put your distractions aside and follow me.

The lessons here are clear and to the point. **Following Christ may mean losing everything in this world; especially the security and comforts of this world.** To often we peddle Christianity and coming to Jesus for the things you can get as a result. But the only reason we should come to Jesus, should follow Jesus, should seek to know Jesus is for Jesus; not for something we hope to get. We're going to sing a song in a moment to concentrate our thoughts on this text. Do we really mean these lyrics? Or is it just a nice tune to sing so we feel good about coming to church and doing our duty? I know this series has been beating some of you up, it's been beating me up to. If we are going to faithfully live out what the Bible teaches we need to be willing to radically follow Jesus as we have perhaps not done before.

Another lesson for us here is this, notice that **Jesus doesn't beg. He asks for unconditional trust and undivided affection.** If we are unwilling to give that, we are not fit to call ourselves His followers. Biblical Christianity is not easy. Discipleship is not easy, ask our brothers and sisters in Christ in China, or North Korea, or the Ukraine, or even some of your own great grandparents before they go home to the Lord. The story of Mennonite Brethren is one of tremendous suffering for the sake of Christ, and the privilege of being able to call Jesus Lord, Savior, and Rabbi.

Finally, thinking on the passage we studied last week, Jesus healing the man with leprosy, the centurion's servant, and Peter's mother-in-law → **when Jesus speaks, leprosy, paralysis, and fever obey; the question is will you?**