Studies in The Gospel of Matthew: A Primer for Discipleship

Lesson Nine

Face the Radical Nature of Discipleship

Focal Text
Matthew 8:18-22

Background
Matthew 8:16-22

Main Idea
Jesus demands that his disciples place him over the most legitimate and precious of human concerns, even shelter and family, as well as cultural expectations.

Question to Explore
How far should we go in following Jesus?

Quick Read
Jesus calls us to give everything to him as Lord.

Commentary
“If Jesus is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all.” I remember being impressed by that statement as a young Christian. “Jesus is Lord” is the central affirmation of our faith, the formula we repeat in baptism, one of the earliest confessions in Christian history. But what does it mean for Jesus to be “Lord”?

Our culture separates Sunday from Monday, religion from the real world. Conventional wisdom dictates that making Jesus “Lord” means that we are more religious than most. We attend church more frequently, and we serve and give more sacrificially. Many Christians adopt this cultural ethos without knowing it. If we are more godly in our lives and more active in our faith than others in our church, we must be more committed to our Lord. We measure spirituality by time spent in church buildings and on church causes.
This week we will learn that Jesus made no such distinction between the spiritual and the secular. He called God a King and challenged us to repent of our own kingdom and join his (Matthew 4:17; 6:33). A king sits on the throne every day of the week and rules every dimension of the realm. If God is your King, you’re reading these words on his computer while wearing his clothes and breathing his air.

I’m convinced that the greatest need in the American church is for believers to exchange cultural Christianity for Kingdom commitment. What does it mean for Jesus to be your King and Lord? Let’s ask him.

Trust your possessions to his Kingdom (8:18-20)

Last week we left Jesus at the Sermon on the Mount. Before the Sermon, “large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him” (Matt. 4:25). When Jesus descended from the mountain, these “large crowds” continue to throng around him (8:1).

Then a leper who likely heard the Sermon from his legally prescribed distance came forward and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean” (8:2). Something in Jesus’ words caused this man to know that Jesus was “Lord,” that he was capable of cleansing the most dread disease of their day, and that he would care for this rejected child of Israel.

Jesus responded by touching the man, an act required not to heal him (our Lord often healed just with words, as he would in 8:13) but to show compassion for him. Immediately the man was cleansed and sent to make the offerings needed for his reinsertion into Jewish society (8:3-4).

When Jesus continued into Capernaum, another unlikely ministry recipient emerged—a Roman centurion, commander of 100 soldiers, enforcer of the Empire’s rule over her enslaved subjects (8:5). He asked Jesus to heal his suffering servant (8:6). As he touched a leper, so Jesus was willing to enter a Gentile home (8:7). However, the man understood Jewish sensibilities and was convinced that Jesus could heal the servant just by his authority and proclamation (8:8-9). Jesus was astonished by his faith and acted on it to heal the suffering servant (8:10-13).

Later that Sabbath, our Lord healed Peter’s mother-in-law and then cleansed demoniacs brought to him from the surrounding area (8:14-16). By these acts of compassion he fulfilled the prediction of Isaiah 53: “he took up our infirmities and carried our diseases” (Isaiah 53:4).
An unlikely disciple

Now our text begins: “When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake” (Matt. 8:18). There were times when our Lord saw the crowds’ presence as an opportunity for teaching (see 5:1) or personal ministry (see 14:13-21). At other times he needed to leave them for rest (see 8:23-24) or ministry to individuals (8:28-34). However, he typically returned to continue his Kingdom work with the multitudes as well (see 9:1-8).

On this occasion Jesus “saw” (eidón, meaning to perceive and understand) the crowd pressing in around him, and immediately “gave orders” (ekeleusen, meaning to command or urge) to his disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee to its eastern shore (8:28). This route would take them from the Jewish population and deter the people from following.

As the disciples were preparing the boats for their excursion, “a teacher of the law came to him and said, ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go’” (8:19). “Teacher of the law” translates grammateus, meaning a scribe or expert in the law. Ezra was one such “teacher” (Ezra 7:6) serving as a public instructor to the nation (Nehemiah 8:4). These men were responsible both for copying the Scriptures and for teaching them to the people. Such a scholar, because he was an expert in the Torah, was sometimes referred to as a lawyer or “expert in the law” (see Matt. 22:34).

Many of these scholars were members of the Sanhedrin. They stood alongside the chief priests and elders as leaders of the nation. As a result, many joined the authorities’ opposition to Jesus (see Luke 22:2, 66; 23:10). Had they used their influence for good, however, they would have rendered valuable service to the Kingdom: “every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (Matt. 13:52).

This particular “teacher of the law” was apparently committed to following Jesus as his rabbi: “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” “Teacher” translates didaskalos, meaning instructor, master. It was typically meant as a term of respect, and was attributed to Jesus many times in the Gospels as an indication of the central role teaching played in his ministry. In fact, he called himself “the Teacher” (Matt. 26:18).

In Matthew’s Gospel, however, those who used the title in addressing Jesus did not believe fully in him:

- “Some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, ‘Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you’” (12:38).
- “Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, ‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?’” (19:16).
- “Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we know
you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (22:15-17).

- “That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him’” (22:23-24).
- “Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’” (22:34-36).

Whatever the man in our text meant by his title, his commitment seemed clear: “I will follow you wherever you go.” “I will follow” translates akoloutheso, meaning to come after, accompany, be a disciple. Jesus typically called his disciples to “follow” him (see 9:9; 19:21; also 4:19, where a different Greek word is used). He promised that “whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

This man was already among Jesus’ disciples, as Matthew describes the next man in our text as “another disciple” (Matt. 8:21). He had become a follower of our Lord, but now he wanted to make this commitment unconditional, “wherever you go.” If Jesus had made public his intention to sail to the Gentile regions east of the Sea of Galilee (8:28), such a statement would take on even greater substance. This man, a noted religious authority in the community, was offering to align himself fully with a Galilean carpenter. The apostles would likely have seen this commitment as a significant step forward for their movement.

The cost of commitment
But our Lord knew that discipleship requires more than words: “Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head’” (8:20). “Foxes” (alopekes) were so common in Israel that Samson could catch 300 of them (Judges 15:4). They “have” (echousin, meaning to own or possess) “holes” (pholeous), meaning lairs or dens made in the natural caves and crevasses of the region.

From the ground, Jesus turned (and perhaps pointed) to the sky: “birds of the air have nests.” “Birds” (peteina, meaning wild birds) were so common that Jesus used them as teaching examples (see Matt. 6:26; 13:4, 32); pagans sometimes made idols in their image (Romans 1:23). I purchased one such idol while serving as a missionary in East Malaysia, a wooden image meant to represent the deities living in the heavens.

Such birds in Galilee have “nests,” translating katakseenoseis, meaning lodges, places to live. The Greek translation of the Old Testament uses this word for the “house” David desired to build for God (1 Chronicles 28:2).
While the most common animals of their day had dwelling places of their own, Jesus warned the scribe that “the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” “Son of Man” was Jesus’ favorite self-designation; this is its first use in the Gospel of Matthew. It is used in Daniel 7:13-14 to describe a coming ruler from heaven:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).

The apocryphal book of 1 Enoch develops this figure of a transcendent, coming “righteous one” (1 Enoch 37-71). By contrast, the phrase is used in the Book of Ezekiel many times to address or describe the prophet himself and seems to emphasize his humanity.

The term is found many times in the Gospels; each time it is used by Jesus himself (except John 12:34, where his words are quoted by the crowd). Taken together, the Old Testament references describe Jesus’ incarnation well. He is the “son of man,” fully human; and he is the “Son of Man,” fully divine.

However, even though Jesus is the divine Son of God, Jesus “has” (echei, owns) nowhere he can “lay his head” (kephalen kline, meaning to incline the head, to rest). In other words, he had no home of his own. If this respected religious authority were to cast his lot with Jesus, he could expect to face a life of similar sacrifice.

*When possessions possess us*

Did Jesus mean that his followers must not have homes of their own, that they should always live in extreme poverty? Not at all. But he did indicate that we must be willing to give up everything to follow him, even our possessions if necessary.

In the Sermon he just concluded, Jesus stated:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matt. 5:10-12).

Jesus warned his disciples, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). Paul advised early believers, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of
God” (Acts 14:22). He warned Timothy, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Some suffering is basic to Christian discipleship. This cost did not always include the loss of home and possessions, as Peter had a home (Matt. 8:14; it was the largest yet discovered in Capernaum, if the traditional site is in fact his house). Nicodemus, Zacchaeus, and Joseph of Arimathea were not required to abandon their wealth to follow him.

By contrast, Jesus counseled the Rich Young Ruler to “go, sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Matt. 19:21). In this case, the man needed to forsake his possessions because they had come to possess him.

Here we find the heart of the issue: we are not necessarily called to abandon everything for Christ, but we must be willing to lose whatever keeps us from being fully his. This world is not our home, for “our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). In the meanwhile, we are “strangers in the world” (1 Peter 1:1).

Is Jesus King of your possessions?

Trust your relationships to his Lordship (8:21-22)

A second professing follower then stepped forward on the shore of the Sea of Galilee: “Another disciple said to him, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father’” (Matt. 8:21). “Disciple” translates mathetes, meaning pupil, apprentice, follower. He called Jesus “Lord,” translating kyrios, meaning owner, master, ruler. But then he contradicted his title with his request: “First let me go and bury my father.”

“Let” translates epitrepo, meaning to permit, allow; it can mean to instruct or order. It could be rendered, Give me leave to. . . . The man wanted Jesus’ public blessing on his decision to turn back from the disciples’ group. “First” renders proton, meaning earlier, something done before something else. “Go” translates apelthein, meaning to go away, leave, travel to another place. This man would follow Jesus fully, but only after he left Jesus to complete another task.

That task was to “bury my father.” His request seems completely appropriate to modern readers. His father had died, and he needed to return home to oversee his burial; then he would rejoin Jesus and the other disciples. If your father had just died, wouldn’t you make the same request?

Our Lord’s response therefore seems abrupt and even uncaring: “But Jesus told him, ‘Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead’” (8:22). “Follow” again translates akolouthei, meaning to become a person’s disciple. “Let” renders aphas, meaning to send
away, depart from, give to others. “The dead bury their own dead” is a straightforward translation of the Greek: *tous nekros thapsai eauton nekrous*. Why did Jesus respond in this way?

**Clues and options**

The cultural context gives us three clues essential to solving this puzzle. First, this man’s father had not just died. If he had, burial would have occurred within twenty-four hours; the son and the rest of his family would have been in reclusive mourning, not in public. Second, he was apparently the oldest son of his father, as he felt responsible for his parent’s burial. Such a duty was incumbent upon him for as long as his father lived. Third, the Jews buried in stages. The initial burial took place within twenty-four hours of death; typically, the body was placed directly in the ground. A year later, after the flesh had rotted from the bones, a second burial occurred as the bones were disinterred and placed in an ossuary (a stone burial box).

Given these facts, we can envision five possibilities behind our text. Remember that Jesus knew the thoughts of others (Luke 6:8) and responded to the motives he discerned behind the man’s seemingly understandable request. Given these facts, we can envision five ways to interpret our text. I have ranked them in ascending order of probability:

1. The man’s father was ill and would likely die soon. The son wanted to leave Jesus to be with him and to oversee the immediate first-stage burial that would soon be required.

2. The man’s father had already died, his remains buried in the ground, but the time was approaching when they would be removed and the bones placed in an ossuary; the son wanted to go home to oversee this task.

3. “Let me go and bury my father” means, *Let me wait until my father has died and will no longer object to my commitment to you*.

4. The man’s father had just died and been buried; the son wanted a year-long reprieve from following Jesus, and used the second-stage burial as his excuse.

5. The man’s father was in good health, but his son wanted to return home and used his burial responsibilities as an excuse to leave Jesus.

Given Jesus’ consistent compassion for hurting people, the first option seems the least likely. This son was under legal and cultural obligation to bury his father—surely Jesus would recognize his grief and offer comfort, not challenge.

Regarding the second option: Jesus’ edict, “let the dead bury their own dead,” could refer to interred remains. The second-stage burial was not nearly as significant or symbolic as the first, and it could be handled by others. However, leaving to attend to this task would not remove the man from discipleship for long. If this was his motive, Jesus’ response would indicate that the son was using the coming second-stage burial as an excuse to leave Jesus’ movement more permanently.
The third option makes sense in light of the biblical requirement to honor one’s parents (Exodus 20:12). It is possible that Jesus’ reply, “let the dead bury their own dead,” was meant spiritually rather than physically (which would be impossible) or metaphorically. In this case, the man’s father and family were not true believers in the Lord, so that they were spiritually dead.

Either they had already objected to his commitment to Jesus, or the son knew they would oppose his faith. Whichever was the case, he wanted to wait until his father’s death to continue following our Lord. However, Jesus consistently called us to place him before all others, even our families (Matt. 10:37). Our Lord’s stern answer would indicate that the man needed a strong reminder to order his priorities correctly.

The fourth option seems more likely than the previous three, given the nature of Jesus’ response to the man. He knew that the son’s request was a disingenuous excuse and wanted to expose his motives.

The fifth option seems most likely to me. “Let me go and bury my father” would seem to refer to the first-stage burial more than the second-stage reinterment. Jesus’ very strong rebuke would be especially appropriate if the man were offering such a disingenuous excuse to abandon his commitment to the Lord.

Principles for life
What lessons can we discern in Jesus’ response to this man?

Our Lord did not reject or devalue our commitment to the family. Jesus chose to perform his first public miracle at a wedding, blessing and endorsing marriage and the family (John 2:1-11). He looked sternly on divorce (Matt. 19:9) and those who abandoned their commitment to their parents (15:3-9).

Scripture teaches us to care for our families: “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8). It also requires believers to stay in marriage even to unbelievers, so long as the lost person does not abandon them: “If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him” (1 Corinthians 7:12-14).

However, our commitment to God must come before all others. Jesus told the crowds, “Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). There is a cost to following Jesus, one we must count before we make our commitment to him:
Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.”

Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:28-33).

Is there anything God cannot ask you to give or do for him? Is there any relationship you value more than your relationship with your Father?

**Conclusion**
Jesus’ call to discipleship was radical. While the priests asked for some of the people’s time and possessions, and the pagan religions required occasional rituals and commitments, our Lord wants to be King of every dimension of our lives.

Paradoxically, the churches that ask the most of their members are those congregations growing most quickly today. Over the Christmas break I spoke with a Korean Christian in Dallas. She asked whether my church would be holding a New Year’s Eve prayer service; I told her that most American churches no longer offered such events. She smiled and nodded in understanding.

Then I asked whether her Korean church would be holding such a prayer meeting. She said they would, from 8 PM through midnight. I asked how many would come. “Seven or eight hundred,” she replied. Her congregation prays every Saturday at 5:45 AM, and often holds similar meetings through the year.

Churches in South Korea typically hold daily prayer meetings at 4 AM. One prays all night every Friday night. Is it any wonder that several churches in South Korea are among the largest churches in the world?

In my travels to Cuba I have witnessed apostolic Christianity at work. These believers sacrifice so much to follow Jesus, and yet their churches are packed every Sunday. My last time to preach at First Baptist Church in Camaguey, Cuba, on that Sunday morning they watched 330 people make professions of faith. Their sanctuary is located four feet from the Communist headquarters in their city. The greater their sacrifice, the stronger their experience of God’s power and grace.
When I first began going to Cuba, I told the pastors there that I was praying for persecution against their churches to lessen. They asked me to stop praying this prayer, explaining that it was the persecution they faced that showed them real Christians from false and strengthened their faith. Then one confided in me that he is praying for more persecution to come against American Christians, to strengthen us.

Should we join him?

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