

OpenTheo

Matthew 8:18 - 8:22



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this lesson, Steve Gregg continues his study of the life of Jesus Christ in Matthew 8:18-22. Jesus tells his followers that they should learn from him and find rest for their souls. He also points out that his ministry is not politically motivated and he does not seek to attract the Pharisees. Despite the uncertainty and lack of security that comes with following Jesus, people still choose to follow him. Finally, Gregg emphasizes that being a follower of Jesus requires commitment and that preaching the gospel is a calling for those who are spiritually alive.

Transcript

Today we're turning to Matthew chapter 8 and continuing our study in the life of Jesus Christ. At verse 18, Matthew 8 and verse 18 is where we begin. Matthew writes, now, when Jesus saw great multitudes about him, he gave a command to depart to the other side, meaning the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

And the command was given to the disciples to take him in a boat across the lake to avoid these multitudes. Then a certain scribe came and said to him, Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go. And Jesus said to him, Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

Then another of his disciples said to him, Lord, let me first go and bury my father. But Jesus said to him, Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead. Then he got into the boat, and we'll take that another time.

Let's take a look at these two men who approached Jesus just as he was about to go across. Now, we read in verse 18, when Jesus saw great multitudes about him, he gave the command to depart. That's an interesting thing.

Certainly Jesus was motivated differently than many preachers are today. Usually, when a preacher begins to see his ministry gathering attention and gathering crowds, that's the time that he doesn't want to take off and try another location. Most ministers, it seems, will judge their success, or even will judge the will of God for their ministries, by whether they are reaching many people or not, and whether there's many people being

attracted to their church or to their meetings.

If they are, that's considered a sign of success. And it certainly is a mistake for a pastor to take, I mean, in natural reasoning, it's a mistake for a pastor to take a vacation or a sabbatical right at the time when the ministry is growing. You need to stay around and make sure you manage that growth is the typical way it would be thought.

But here's Jesus embarking on a fairly young ministry in Galilee. People are just starting to pay attention to him. He's healing everybody, casting out demons.

The message is getting around. Multitudes are coming in from all over the place. And so he says to his disciples, let's get out of here.

Let's get in the boat and go to the other side of the sea. Now, the sea here would be the Sea of Galilee, which is actually a very large lake. But it was Jesus and his disciples frequently crossed it.

The disciples had boats because some of them had been fishermen before they had been followers of Jesus. And although they had given up their fishing trade to follow Jesus, they did not necessarily get rid of all their equipment. And so these boats were pressed into the service of transporting Jesus when he wanted to go across the water.

Now, it's amazing because Jesus here begins to see his ministry is just starting to produce some results. He's spent about a year in obscurity in the first year of his ministry. And now he's beginning the second year of his ministry and starting to get some attention.

And multitudes are coming. He could set up a big church. He could take big offerings.

If he wanted to drive the Romans out, he's starting to get the kind of popular support that might make that a feasible program. But he doesn't want that. Jesus was never enamored by large crowds following him.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, you will find that Jesus was looking for quality more than quantity. I don't want to say he didn't care about large numbers of people because I believe that Jesus cared about all people and that Jesus would have all to be saved. But he had a different opinion than many of us do as to what people actually need.

Many of us feel that what people need most is just to get locked into the church. If we just get them to come to the church on a regular basis, then they'll hear sermons. And they might even get saved.

And if we can keep them hearing sermons after they've gotten saved, we can probably keep them in the fold. And it'll be good for the church. It'll be good for them.

And the more, the merrier. And, you know, the best thing we can do is hope for big

crowds of people who are loyal to the meetings. Well, that's not what Jesus apparently felt.

Jesus never was one to encourage great crowds. Now, let me make this clear. Jesus did not try to keep anyone from following him who was sincere.

After all, he put out a general invitation in Matthew chapter 11. He said, Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.

For I am gentle and meek and you'll find rest for your souls. And that was a general call to all who were weary and all who wanted to could come and follow him. But if somebody wanted to follow him, they had to be sincere.

They had to be sincere and committed. Because following Jesus was not going to always be popular. Now, at this particular point in his ministry, Jesus was becoming very popular.

And a lot of people might have wanted to jump on that bandwagon. After all, he had just spent the night healing everybody in town who was sick and casting out demons. His ministry was spreading.

His reputation was spreading. If people wanted to get in on his movement at the ground floor, this was the time to jump on the bandwagon. Because he was the happening thing.

If he had a public stock he was offering, this would be the time to get in on that stock at the ground level. Because it was about ready to take off. But Jesus wasn't operating that way.

He didn't care to have a lot of people just jumping on the bandwagon. Or people who just wanted to see the miracles. What Jesus wanted was committed disciples.

And we can see that illustrated in his answers to these two men. Here, the crowd is coming. And instead of encouraging a crowd of curiosity seekers to follow him, even though that might outwardly give him the semblance of great influence and great fame and the kinds of things that many people, including many preachers, would be very glad to have, Jesus was not interested in that.

He suspected that the people were not committed disciples. And he found that out. Or at least he tested a couple of them on this occasion.

Because as he was getting into the boat to depart across to get away from the crowds, a certain scribe came and said to him. Now, a scribe was usually a Pharisee by religion. The Jews were of various religious camps.

There were Sadducees and there were Pharisees. There were Essenes and there were

Zealots. The Essenes were a very separated group out in the wilderness.

We never encountered them in the Gospels. But the Zealots were a very politically active group who believed in overthrowing the Romans and recovering the liberty of Palestine from their foreign oppressors. They were mostly a politically motivated group.

The larger religious groups in Israel were the Pharisees and the Sadducees, of which the Pharisees were the most influential in terms of popularity among the people. The Pharisees only numbered about 3,000 in Israel, according to Josephus. But they exerted an influence that was disproportionate to their numbers.

People tended to look at the Pharisees as more pious than their rivals, the Sadducees. The Sadducees were less spiritual. They didn't even believe in certain spiritual things like angels and spirits and so forth.

And they were more compromised. The Sadducees actually were corroborating more with the Roman overlords and seemed less eager to see the Romans thrown out. Well, the scribes usually belonged to the Pharisee camp.

They were students of the law, and they were students of the rabbinic traditions. And Jesus, at this point in his ministry, did not attract a lot of Pharisees to his ministry, at least not friendly ones. Now, later in the book of Acts, we find that quite a few Pharisees became believers and joined the church, not the least of which was Saul of Tarsus, who became the apostle Paul.

But at this time, in Jesus' ministry, he was usually opposed by Pharisees. But here's an exception. This scribe probably was a scribe of the Pharisee camp, since most of the scribes were.

And he came and said to Jesus, Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go. Now, that sounds like commitment. He didn't just say, you know, I'd like to come to church once a week and pay my tithes.

He said, I'm willing to give up all my other itineraries, all my other commitments, and just go with you wherever you want to go. Now, that's a pretty major commitment. How many people in your church, or let me ask you, how about you? Would you just give up your job and go wherever Jesus wants you to go? Well, perhaps you would.

I'm not suggesting you wouldn't. There certainly are many out there listening to this radio program who would do that. But let's face it.

There's an awful lot of people probably in the churches who profess to be Christians, who are even members in good standing, who would never dream of giving up their career in order to do something radical, like just go itinerate with Jesus and be part of his moving company. And yet here's a man who says, Lord, I'll do that. I'll give up what I was doing

and follow you.

Now, of course, this scribe might have been an itinerant already. He might have been following some other leader. He might have been under some other rabbi before.

We don't know. But Jesus suspected that this man had not fully understood what it means to follow him, as was so often the case. The people thought they knew what it meant to follow him and thought they had a commitment to him.

But often he wanted to test them and see whether they really knew and were willing to pay the price. Jesus said to him, Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests. But the Son of Man, that means Jesus, has nowhere to lay his head.

That is to say, he didn't have a regular home. Although he did stay in Capernaum in Peter's house much of the time when he was there, yet he had to travel a great deal. And he spent weeks at a time, if not months at a time, away from his lodging place.

And he would have to sleep out under the stars sometimes. No doubt sometimes people who were strangers took him into their homes. We don't know.

From the very time that Jesus was born, the very night he was born, he didn't have a place that is a traditional place to lay his head. His parents had to sleep that night in an ox stall. And Jesus was born in a manger.

Now most of his years growing up, he did have a home with his parents. And he worked in a carpenter shop. But once he left home, he began to travel and didn't have a regular place to call home.

And that meant that those who would follow him would also have to have that kind of uncertainty as to where they would sleep the next night and so forth, and probably where they'd get their next meal. Now that's not necessarily true of everyone who follows Jesus today because not everyone is called to be an itinerant preacher as Jesus was. But all are, of course, commanded to follow him in the sense of doing his will and following his teachings and imitating him in terms of his character and his obedience to his father.

But there are different callings. Not all people today are called to be homeless, to follow Jesus. However, in those days, if you wanted to follow him around, you'd have to be prepared for that very thing.

The scribe, apparently, was not accustomed to just moving around without any certain dwelling place. And for that reason, Jesus confronted him with that. He said, you know, even the foxes have holes to sleep in.

The fox always knows where its den is, and it returns to the same place every night. And

the birds have nests. You know, they have a regular place to sleep.

But he said, the Son of Man does not have anywhere to lay his head. What Jesus was saying, of course, is that he had not as much security in this world and prosperity in this world as even some of the woodland creatures had. The birds and the foxes had regular homes to return to, but Jesus didn't.

He was not rich when he was on the earth. He didn't own a lot. He traveled light.

And he was saying to the scribe, is this the lifestyle you really want? Are you sure you want to follow me? You know, if I don't have anywhere to lay my head and you're with me, you probably won't have anywhere to lay yours either. Now, he was letting the man know that there would be a fair degree of discomfort to be prepared for if he would follow him. Now, once again, many of us who follow Jesus have not really had to suffer a great deal of discomfort.

But at the same time, following Jesus means doing whatever he wants you to do. In this case, with Jesus walking around the countryside, if someone wanted to follow him, it meant that you had to follow him around and listen to his teachings and do what he said and be available to do his bidding and so forth. Nowadays, of course, Jesus isn't one place at a time.

He's everywhere. And we can follow him without necessarily moving geographically unless he tells us to do so. But the point is we still have to have the same commitment to follow him even if it means homelessness.

Even if it means poverty. Even if it means great depriving of things that we consider to be normal things. What could be more normal than lodging? You know, the Apostle Paul told Timothy that having food and raiment, that's clothing, we will with these things be content.

He said this in 1 Timothy 6. Now, when I was in school, I learned that there are three basic needs of man and that is food, clothing, and shelter. But Paul told Timothy we must be content if we have only food and clothing. He did not include shelter.

And perhaps he meant by clothing, merely covering, which could include shelter. But Jesus sometimes didn't have ordinary shelter. There were times he just didn't have any place to call home.

And that is a way of life that many people would find uncomfortable and unpleasant. And Jesus asked this man, he didn't ask him, he told him, this is essentially what you're looking at if you follow me. We do not read of this man ever again.

And for that reason, it is probable that once he heard the cost, he was not so quick to want to follow. Now, we don't know. I mean, we don't want to judge him too harshly.

Perhaps once this man heard it, he said, okay, that's fine with me. I'll follow you. And he may have become one of Jesus' followers.

After all, there were many followers of Jesus that we think usually of the twelve. But the twelve were simply the apostles that Jesus chose from the larger body of people who were following him. And he had many people who followed him.

This scribe may have become one of them or may not have. But one thing is clear. The point of the story is not to let us know what the scribe ended up doing.

The point of the story is to show that Jesus was not eager to have people follow him who had not counted the cost. It's easy to give an altar call after you've given a gospel message that's all about going to heaven, but doesn't tell anything about bearing the cross, doesn't tell anything about suffering persecution for Jesus' sake. There are many gospel messages presented today that talk about all the rosy aspects of Jesus healing your sickness and providing you with all the things you need and giving you peace of mind and taking you to heaven after all.

All these things. And sure, a lot of people respond to these altar calls, but many of them have never been presented with the real cost of following Jesus. And what is the cost? Well, I can't say because I don't know.

It will cost different people different things. Some people, it will cost them their very lives and they'll die as martyrs. And others, it will cost them financially or some other way.

But the point is we have to be prepared to pay whatever cost it is, including martyrdom if it comes to that. In this case, this man merely had to be pointed out, have it pointed out to him that Jesus didn't have a regular home. And if he wanted to follow him, he might have to sleep outdoors sometimes.

This may have put him off. It may not have. But one thing we can see that the mere gathering of a multitude after him did not enamor Jesus with the prospects for him being a famous preacher.

He wanted each person who followed him to count the cost and to be truly committed to endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ, as Paul told Timothy to do in 2 Timothy 2 and verse 2, I believe it is, or 3. Now, what happens next? There's another guy in verse 21, Matthew 8, 21. It says, Then another of his disciples said to him, Lord, let me first go and bury my father. And Jesus said to him, Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.

Now, this man is not said to be a scribe like the other, but this one is actually said to be one of his disciples. Now, when we hear one of his disciples, we shouldn't understand that to mean one of the twelve apostles. Because the word disciple in the scriptures is used much more broadly than the word apostle.

There were many disciples, but only twelve apostles in the days that Jesus walked the earth. And that being so, we should not necessarily assume that it was Peter, James, or John, or Thaddeus, or Andrew, or any of these people who were asking this question. But just somebody who had begun to follow Jesus, along with maybe a lot of others.

And he became aware that it was separating him from his family. And he said, Lord, could I just go first and bury my father? Now, that seems like a reasonable request. I mean, if your father has died, it might indeed be your responsibility to bury him.

But there are many scholars who believe that this man's wording does not even insinuate that the father had yet died. Now, you might think, you know, well, why would he say I have to bury my father if my father hadn't died? Well, it's a manner of speaking. His father might have yet been alive, but the son may have felt like it's his obligation to stay home until his father died and was buried.

In other words, he had an obligation to stay with the family until he had buried his father. That might be many years hence from then. And so some scholars believe that the man was not really one who had just lost his father and had an urgent need to bury him, but rather was a man who simply wanted to stay home until the claims of his father over his life were expired by his father's death.

And when his father had been buried, then he could do what he wanted and follow Jesus. There are many people who do not follow Jesus during the lifetime of their parents because their parents would not approve. But Jesus said elsewhere in Matthew chapter 10, if anyone loves father or mother more than me, he's not worthy of me.

And it's important to follow Jesus whether parents approve or not. It's easy to say, well, when my parents are dead, they won't know what I do, and therefore I can get away with doing things I always wanted to do for God. Because they'd never approve if I did it during their lifetime.

Well, I'm afraid that once you're an adult, you've got to follow Jesus despite your parents' disapproval. If he calls, you need to follow. The way Jesus said it to this man, follow me and let the dead bury their own dead.

Now, what does that mean, let the dead bury their own dead? Well, what Jesus was saying is this man wants to go bury his father. Now, his father may have been dead already, or at least the man wanted to wait until his father's dead to bury him. But he was saying when the dead need to be buried, you don't have to do it yourself.

There are some jobs that those who are spiritually dead can do as well as those who are spiritually alive. Let those who are spiritually dead bury dead bodies. I'm calling you to follow me and preach the gospel.

Not everyone can do that. You see, the Christian calling is a unique calling to do that

which can't be done by everyone. Only those who've been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and given the Holy Spirit and gifted for ministry can ever really successfully preach the gospel and spread the kingdom of God.

That's something only Christians can do. There are many vocations, including burying dead people, that can be done by those who aren't even spiritually alive at all. Non-Christians can do some jobs as well as Christians can.

Because those jobs do not require somebody who's spiritually alive to do them, someone who's been born again. And Jesus is saying to this man, you have a higher calling than that. Your father can be buried by others.

Anyone can bury a dead body, Christian or otherwise. But I'm calling you to be a preacher. I'm calling you to travel around and minister along with me.

And not everyone can do that. So let the dead bury the dead. Let those who are not Christians, let those who are spiritually dead, do those kinds of tasks that spiritually dead people can do as well as Christians can.

But you, you're being called to do something that only a Christian can do. And that is to be a minister of the gospel and a follower of Jesus Christ. And one who can spread the kingdom of God.

And that is a much higher calling than just to stay around and please your folks and get the kind of career that they always hoped you'd have. And then, you know, when your father dies and is buried, then to feel free to do whatever you should have done for God. Abraham made that mistake because God called him to leave his father and his homeland and he didn't.

And he went out with his father and did not get all the way to where God wanted him to go. You can read about that in chapter 11 of Genesis. It wasn't until Abraham's father died that Abraham finally obeyed God and went into the land of Canaan.

Abraham made this mistake. Jesus told this man not to do so. Burying your father can be done by anybody.

Preaching the gospel can only be done by those who are called. So let those who are spiritually dead do what they can do well enough. And you do the thing that only a believer called of God can do.

Well, we're out of time for this program, so we'll continue next time with the study of Matthew.