

The Demands of Discipleship

Matthew 8:18-27

(The following text is taken from a sermon preached by Gil Rugh.)

1. The Cost Involved
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This passage considers what is entailed in becoming a follower of Jesus Christ and the demands He places upon those who are His followers. The miracles that Matthew records are offered as proof that Jesus is the Messiah. The purpose of offering these proofs is so the people may believe in Christ and become His followers. In this section of Scripture, Matthew is going to record the response of some who are exposed to the work of Christ and who desire to be His followers. That will show what is involved in being a follower of Christ. Through the examples of two individuals, Matthew is going to deal with the cost of being a disciple of Christ and show the urgency and priority of His ministry and message.

1. The Cost Involved

Jesus has been ministering to the people and performing miracles in their presence, and the excitement of the multitude has been building. But it is not time in the plan of God for the culmination and climax of Jesus' acceptance as their king. So Jesus got into the boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. Verse 18 says, **"Now when Jesus saw a crowd around Him, He gave orders to depart to the other side."** Some of the people will follow Him, but not many will be able to cross the sea with Him. When He arrives at the other side, He will resume His ministry of teaching and doing miraculous works.

Verse 19 continues: **"And a certain scribe came and said to Him, 'Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.'"** This scribe calls Jesus "teacher", acknowledging Him as one who can instruct a scribe. In effect, he is saying that he wants to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. He wants to learn from Christ and be with Him wherever He is in His ministry.

This is remarkable in that it shows something of the impact of Christ's ministry. But it is even more remarkable that this man is a scribe who is indicating this desire. In the New Testament and in the gospels, it is not uncommon to have three groups linked together: the scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The scribes are often linked with the Pharisees in opposition to the ministry and message of Jesus Christ. But here is a scribe who says he wants to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

The scribes were the scholars or learned men of the day. They made the systematic study and exposition of the Law their profession. They were the experts in Moses' writings. If you wanted to know what the Law meant and how it applied, the scribes were the ones to tell you, they were the recognized authorities in the Old Testament Law, although in their teachings they had gone beyond what Moses said. The scribes were greatly respected by the masses of people in Israel, and they sought the acclaim and honor of the Jews. They liked to go around in their robes of nobility, and they liked being called rabbi, an acknowledgment of their position as authorities, teachers and leaders. They basked in the glory that was theirs as scribes.

The scribes differed from the Pharisees and Sadducees in that the scribes had formal positions. The Pharisees and

Sadducees were religious parties. Most of the scribes were Pharisees, and the scribes provided the teaching and interpretation of the Law that the Pharisees followed.

This scribe would have provided a key opportunity for Christ to have a follower from among the respected and influential class in Israel. As someone who was acknowledged as an authority in the Law and was respected as such, the scribe could influence the Pharisees on Jesus' behalf.

If Jesus were looking for someone with influence, this was His great chance. When He got to the other side of the sea, this man could have provided many openings for Him. He could start His meetings by introducing this scribe and having him give his testimony. The people would surely respect and understand his opinion since he knew the Law. For this recognized authority to become Jesus' disciple would make the people all the more open to Him. But that is not the pattern Jesus followed.

2. The Cost Revealed

He responded to this man at the very point of tension in verse 20: **“And Jesus said to him, ‘The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.’”** The scribes, along with the Sadducees and Pharisees, loved the honor of the people and all that went with it. Jesus is telling this scribe that if he becomes His follower, he will have nothing. Jesus has no home to call His own. If you do not have a home, a place of your own that you can return to, a place to store your belongings, what do you have? Nothing. Christ is saying that He is not even like the animals, the foxes or the birds. He does not have a place to call His own.

This scribe would understand that when one becomes a disciple of a teacher, he becomes like the teacher. The scribe knew that to become a follower of Christ, he would have to abandon all that he had. This meant he would have to become a nomad with nothing. Jesus, in effect, challenges him, *“Have you considered the cost of following Me?”* The scribe may have been caught up in the enthusiasm of the people and the excitement of the day. But Jesus wanted to know if he had really considered what his decision would entail?

Matthew 23:2 shows the attitude of the scribes: **“The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses.”** The scribes and Pharisees are linked together because the scribes were providing the doctrinal interpretation of the Law for the Pharisees. Jesus continues in verses 5 through 7: **“But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi.”** Jesus zeros right in on the real issue at hand for this scribe. He asks him if he understands that he must forgo all of these things to become a follower of the Son of Man.

It is important to realize that Jesus does not try to make it easy to become His follower, He does not minimize the cost. It is easy for us to want to win people to Christ so badly that we fall into the trap of playing down the costs and playing up the benefits. We sometimes tell people that if they will trust Christ, then their sins will be forgiven and Christ will come in and take up residence in their lives, make them new persons, bring them His joy and happiness and prepare them for heaven. That is all true. But sometimes people go away thinking that if they trust Christ, everything from here on will be joyful and happy with no problems. In fact, sometimes people are given the idea that their lives do not need to be different at all; they can become Christ's followers and continue to live just as they are. That is a lie! You cannot do that. The life you have when you become a believer in Jesus Christ is no longer your life. After you trust Him, you are not your own. Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, **“For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body”** (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Some people trust Christ thinking that all of a sudden their problems will melt away. In reality, things will begin to get more difficult in many ways. They will have tension, opposition and persecution from family members that they have never experienced before. They will have opposition from friends that they have never experienced before. Satan will oppose them in ways he never has before. They must realize that when they follow Christ, everything belongs to Him, including their lives and everything about them. He is free to do with them as He pleases. But His followers have the assurance that He always does what is for their good and His glory. However, that does not mean it will be an easy road.

Jesus makes that clear to this scribe. He wants the scribe to understand that to become His follower, the scribe must be prepared to pay the price. He does it in a way to draw this man's attention to who He is.

3. The Son of Man

Jesus tells the man in Matthew 8:20, **"The Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."** Jesus' favorite name for Himself is *"Son of Man."* No one in the gospels refers to Him as Son of Man, but He refers to Himself in this way about eighty times. This is the first time that Matthew records it. It is a name which stresses the humanity of Christ, a name which identifies Him with mankind.

Ezekiel uses this name for himself in his prophecy in the Old Testament, stressing his identification with the people to whom he is ministering. As Jesus uses this name, it stresses His identification with humanity. Jesus is saying with this title that He Himself is human. It also stresses the fact that He is the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Israel.

The background for this name is in the Book of Daniel. The scribe to whom Jesus is talking, being an expert in the Old Testament, would immediately recognize the identification that Christ is making when He calls Himself the Son of Man. This phrase is used in a messianic context in Daniel 7 where Daniel has been unfolding the coming kingdoms of the world. These kingdoms will culminate in the kingdom of God on earth with the rule and reign of the Messiah, the King of Israel, as king over the nation of Israel and over the world.

Daniel 7:13 says, **"I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him."** That title, **"Son of Man,"** becomes the title that Jesus takes for Himself. Verse 14 continues, **"and to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed."** This prophecy concerning the coming Messiah says He will rule over a kingdom which is eternal. He will be sovereign over everything.

As Jesus approaches this scribe, He presents a paradox to him. The Son of Man, the one who is to rule and reign over all, has no place to call His own. The dilemma this scribe faces is whether he is willing to abandon everything in order to become a follower of the Messiah who is destined to rule over everything. I wish Matthew had recorded the decision of this scribe, but in the next verse he goes on to another situation.

I can almost hear that scribe thinking to himself: *Well, I have all of this honor, prestige, influence and glory. Now He is telling me that I must give up all of that to get in that little boat and follow a man who doesn't even have a place to call home.* If he does not follow this Man, what are the options? Yes, there is a cost in following Christ. But there is a tremendous cost in not following Him! Where else is forgiveness, cleansing, salvation and hope for eternity found? Nowhere else. Jesus Christ draws his attention to this point to make him understand what it means to be a follower of Christ.

The first account is of a scribe which emphasizes the *cost* of being a follower of Christ. The second incident is of a man who wants to bury his father. This account emphasizes the *priority* which must be ascribed to following Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ must take precedence over everyone and everything. There is an urgency about being a disciple of Christ and being involved in His mission and ministry.

4. The Priority Required

Matthew records the account of another individual on this occasion in Matthew 8:21 and 22: **"And another of the disciples said to Him, 'Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Follow Me; and allow the dead to bury their own dead.'"**

The subject of discipleship is found throughout the Gospel of Matthew. The word, *disciple*, is used in a variety of ways. It basically refers to a learner, someone who is being taught by someone else. Sometimes it is used generally. All of those in the multitudes who have been listening to the teachings of Christ have, in a general sense, been following Him and observing His miracles. They could all be called disciples. This word is also used more specifically of those who

are believers in Him and truly belong to Him.

In this second account, the man referred to as a disciple wants to go and *bury his father*. This phrase can be interpreted two ways. One interpretation is that the father had recently died and the son wants to complete the funeral arrangements and probably observe the thirty-day period of mourning. The other possibility, the one favored by most commentators, is that he is asking if he could remain with his aged father until he dies. Then after his father has died and the son has taken care of the arrangements, he will become a follower of Christ.

It does not really matter which interpretation is used, the point is the same. Jesus tells the man that He must take precedence over the man's father. The mission that Jesus is on has such urgency about it that he must follow Him now. There are others who can attend to the burial of the dead. Jesus is telling him to let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead. Those who have no spiritual perception and no hope of becoming involved in a spiritual ministry can take care of the other details, but this young man is to concentrate on following Christ. Jesus is not intending to be hard or unkind, but He is making the point that one who is going to follow Christ must understand what is entailed.

Many Christians in this country have done a great disservice to people with the way they proclaim Jesus Christ. As a result, many of their hearers are completely mixed up. They think they can believe in Christ and life will go on as it was without a radical change. The priorities of their lives are no different than they were before they professed to become followers of Christ.

Before you became a follower of Christ, the priority of your life may have been your father, your father's business, your job or other things. But when you believe in Jesus Christ and begin to follow Him, your whole life is reoriented. Now He is the priority; everything is seen in light of Him. That does not mean you do not have other responsibilities, but all of your responsibilities are ordered in light of the priority of your life in Jesus Christ.

Many people today claim to have trusted Christ. But their lives show no change; their priorities have not been altered at all. That is not possible after what Christ has said about following Him. He must be our first priority. There is urgency in that priority as expressed in John 9:4: **"We must work the works of Him who sent Me, as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can work."** There is urgency and necessity in that statement.

5. The Urgency of the Message

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 6:2, **"Behold, now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of salvation.'"** As believers, we have lost sight of the urgency of that statement. We do people a great disservice when we present Jesus Christ without the urgency this priority demands. As a result, people are left in a fog. What does it mean to be a believer in Jesus Christ? Many people understand that Christ died for them, and they have trusted Him as their Savior. But what does that mean for their lives? We sometimes tell them, *"Oh, don't worry about that, God will take care of it."* It is true, He will; but they need to know that there is going to be a difference in their lives and they need to be prepared for that.

Do you know why we do not present the gospel in that way? It is because often our own lives have become so muddled and we are so absorbed in the cares of this life that we have lost our bearings on what really matters. We measure life in light of things instead of Jesus Christ being the priority and everything else being measured in light of that. We have lost the sense of urgency that following Jesus Christ demands.

Frequently I have contact with unbelievers and fail to share the gospel with them. I sometimes think it would not be appropriate to present the gospel to them at that time, and after all, they might be offended. You will probably see many unbelievers today. Will you share the gospel with them clearly or will you be more concerned about what they think? Are you concerned that it may cost your friendship if you present the gospel to them? Will they be angry? Will your family disown you?

If Gabriel came knocking at your door this afternoon (he won't, but if he did), and said to you, *"I just came to tell you that Jesus is coming at 10:15 tonight; we will see you at 10:16 in heaven,"* what would you say? Would you say, *"Thank you,"* then keep an appointment with some of your unbelieving friends? Would you talk about the Olympics or about the weather? What would be the burning urgency of your life? Surely you would have to tell them that Jesus

Christ is coming and that apart from Him there is no hope. There would be nothing so urgent as that.

Unfortunately, the priorities of our lives have become so confused that when we are with unbelievers we think we do not want to offend them or it might not be the right time. As a result, our lives go right on by us and they never hear the gospel from us. It is because we have lost Jesus Christ as the priority of our lives. Is it more important that you try to maintain their friendship or that you make Jesus Christ known? Is it more important that you be promoted in your job or that you make Jesus Christ known? Is it more important that you make more money or that you make Jesus Christ known? Sometimes it is in God's plan for you to be promoted in your job and make Jesus Christ known. You may even make lots of money as you make Jesus Christ known. I am not saying you cannot make Him known and also accomplish these other things. But I am saying that the priorities of your life must be arranged properly.

Jesus Christ must be number one. We must present Him even if it offends our father, makes our mother unhappy or divides our family. The priority of our lives must be Jesus Christ. There must be an urgency about our service for Him. Everything else must be seen in that light. We must have that kind of urgency in our service for Jesus Christ today. We must not be so muddled and confused that we are ineffective in what really matters.

6. Faith Is the Required Response

Matthew records another miracle in Matthew 8:23-27. I believe these events tie together very well. The entire section from verses 18 through 27 deals with the cost involved in following Christ and in being His disciple. Humanly speaking, it costs you everything. There must be a sense of urgency in following Him; He is to be the priority in life. Also these verses emphasize that one's faith must be unreservedly in Him in every circumstance and situation because He is adequate.

Verse 23 records that Jesus and His disciples got into the boat, **“And when He got into the boat, His disciples followed Him.”** The disciples referred to here are the immediate disciples of Jesus rather than the multitude of people who were following Him. After getting into the boat, they started across the Sea of Galilee. This is not a big ocean, but rather a small sea, thirteen miles long by seven miles wide. It is subject to very sudden and violent storms. Matthew continues the narrative, **“And behold, there arose a great storm in the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves; but He Himself was asleep”**(v. 24). This is a violent storm. The word which is translated “*storm*” is carried over into English in the words “*seismology*” and “*seismograph*.” It is used of earthquakes and means “*a shaking*”. So this is a violent storm with a great upheaval. The waves are so high that they are rolling over the boat, and the boat becomes covered with the waves. The boat is filling with water and is about to sink.

Verse 25 describes their action: **“And they came to Him, and awoke Him, saying, ‘Save us, Lord; we are perishing!’”** Keep in mind that these disciples are experienced fishermen who have spent their lives on the Sea of Galilee. They are men, like Peter, who know what it is to be out on the sea. They are not like some of us who, if we got out on the water and a little wind blew, we would be in a panic. But this is Peter! He has fished in this lake. These disciples are used to being out there. They are accustomed to being caught in the storms and having to make their way home. But this storm is so violent that they are convinced that the boat is going to sink and they are going to perish. So they come to awaken the Lord.

In these events, the deity and the humanity of Christ is seen in a special way. Here is Christ after a wearisome day with the crowds, sleeping in the midst of the storm. His weariness is a clear evidence of His humanity. As He comes to their rescue and commands the storm to stop, the evidence of His deity is clear.

The disciples evidently have enough faith in Him to know that He can do something because they come to Him in verse 25 saying, **“Save us, Lord; we are perishing!”** They believe that He is the Lord and that He can save them. That is a lot of faith! Jesus is in the same boat, in the same sea, in the same storm. We do not know what they expected, but they apparently expected that He would help them through it rather than stop it. When He puts an end to the storm, they are dumbfounded and cannot believe it. There is a certain amount of faith evident when they ask Him to save them. They believe that He can do something, although they do not really have any concept of what He will do.

After being awakened by the disciples, verse 26 says, **“And He said to them, ‘Why are you timid, you men of little**

faith?” Here they are in a storm with the sea in turmoil. The waves are breaking over the boat and they rush to awaken Him. He looks at them and says, *“You cowards! Where is your faith?”* The word which is translated *“timid”* is actually the word which means *“to be cowardly”*. It seems like they have some faith. After all, they ran back and asked Him to save them. But when you stop to think about it, they really did not have a lot of faith. Did they really think the boat could sink with the Messiah, the Son of God, on board? If He had been lost, you can anticipate the questions that would be raised: *“What happened to the Messiah of Israel?” “Oh, I don’t know, I hear His boat went down in the Sea of Galilee. No survivors; all hands lost!”* That really does not make much sense, does it? Can the Lord, the Son of Man of Daniel 7, the One destined to rule everything, drown in a boat catastrophe?

These disciples are in the same boat He is in. There is not much chance of their end of the boat going down and His end staying afloat. What do these disciples really think? It is easy to become irrational under the pressures of the storms of life. There is not much chance that this boat can go down with the Son of God in it. There is no chance that the Messiah of Israel is going to drown in a boating accident. After all, let’s be realistic!

What is the problem? We face the same kinds of situations. When I believed in Jesus Christ, He took up residence in my life. He has promised to never leave me, to never forsake me. He has promised to work all things out for my good and for His glory. He has assured me that He will bring me into the glory of His presence blameless and without spot or blemish. I do not have any doubt about that at all.

But then, when the storms come into my life, when the pressure is on and the trials are difficult to face, things seem to begin to come apart. All of a sudden I say, *“Lord, do you understand? Are you aware of what has happened, Lord?”* Before long I am like the disciples, *“Lord, wake up! I’m perishing!”* I may not use those words, but that is what I am really saying. Often when I go to prayer in those situations, I am trying to wake the Lord up. You know what that is like if you have been a believer very long. While going through the trial, we go to the Lord in prayer and call His attention to something we think He must not be aware of.

Don’t these disciples need to awaken Him? Could He really know that the storm is as bad as it is? Of course He knows. Is there any danger that they will perish? Of course not. Does the Lord know about the storms of my life? Does He know how bad the pressure really is? Does He know that I have been without work this long? Does He know how my wife is treating me? Does He really know the situation where I work? Does He know what is going on here? As those thoughts begin to cross my mind, I say, *“Lord, pay attention! It’s me, Gil. Remember?”*

But then I have to stop and remember that He resides in me. He has promised He will never leave me or forsake me. What do I have to be shaken up about? Let me tell you what I am so shaken about. Those waves are big! Look how much water is in the boat!

In the final analysis, I am better off than the disciples. They are in a boat with the Lord; but the Lord is in me! My body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. He is not going anywhere. What do I have to worry about? My worries are irrational. They are a result of a lack of faith.

Praise the Lord that in the middle of verse 26, He did not just say, **“Why are you timid, you men of little faith?”** then roll over and go back to sleep. He knew what they could handle. Jesus knows our weaknesses; He remembers that we are just flesh.

7. Jesus Christ Is the Son of God and the Son of Man

Verse 26 records that Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith. It also says, **“Then He arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and it became perfectly calm.”** There was no gradual process of the storm subsiding and the waves dying down. Jesus spoke to the wind and the waves and everything became a dead calm. When verse 26 says, **“It became perfectly calm,”** it is saying literally that it became *“a great calm.”* All of a sudden there is no wind blowing; all of a sudden the Sea of Galilee is like glass.

Notice their response in verse 27: **“And the men marveled, saying, ‘What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and sea obey Him?’”** It is one thing to heal people who are sick. It is another thing to command demons to get

out of a body. But for one to stand up, speak to the creation itself and have the elements of the wind and the sea obey, that is something else.

Psalm 89 shows that in the miracle of the stilling of the sea in Matthew 8, the One in the boat is demonstrated to be none other than the Lord God of hosts. **“O Lord God of hosts, who is like Thee, O mighty Lord? Thy faithfulness also surrounds Thee. Thou dost rule the swelling of the sea; when its waves rise, Thou dost still them”** (vs. 8,9). Only He can still the waves when they rise. So this is a clear declaration of the person of Christ as the Son of God, as Deity Himself, He is the One who can quiet the waves in the midst of the storm.

The psalmist also writes of God’s power over the sea in Psalm 107: **“Those who go down to the sea in ships, who do business on great waters; they have seen the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep”** (vs. 23,24). Then He continues in verses 27 through 30: **“They reeled and staggered like a drunken man, and were at their wits’ end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He brought them out of their distresses. He caused the storm to be still, so that the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they were quiet; so He guided them to their desired haven.”** These verses declare who has authority over the wind and the sea. The one who can stand up and even the winds and the sea obey Him is the Lord God of hosts. This is a clear declaration that the one who stilled the waves in Matthew 8 is none other than the promised and prophesied Messiah of Israel.

8. What Is Your Response?

Those who are going to be followers of Jesus Christ must realize that there is a cost involved. When you become a believer in Christ, you trust Him as the one who loved you and died for you, and your life becomes His. He has purchased you by paying the price for your redemption. Your life is now His to do with as He pleases.

As a follower of Christ, He must have the place of priority in my life; He requires precedence over everyone and everything. Since He is the priority of my life, there must be urgency in my following Him. Serving Jesus Christ and making Him known motivates me day after day.

In the midst of it all, there will be difficulties, trials and storms. But He is the one who is sufficient to see me through them all. I can have complete confidence in Him and need not be cowardly or timid. I can be confident in Him without reservation. As I serve Him with urgency, there will be opposition, persecution, resistance, difficulties, trials and distresses. But He is the One who is adequate to see that everything in my life is for my good and His glory to prepare me for eternity in His presence.

As we face difficulties, it is wonderful to be able to settle back in the firm security that we belong to Jesus Christ and to know that our lives are devoted to serving Him. That is true whether things are down or up. Whatever our circumstances, He has them all under control and is preparing us for glory in His presence.

What about your relationship to Jesus Christ? Do you just tip your hat to Him on Sunday mornings by attending church for an hour or two, then absorb the rest of your life with your job and other activities? That is not what being a follower of Jesus Christ is all about. Have you ever realized that He is the Savior, the One who died to pay the penalty for your sin, and have you believed in Him? If you have, it means your life is no longer your own, you have been bought with a price and belong to Him. He becomes the priority of your life. You must then be consumed with the urgency of following and serving Him whatever the cost.

It is exciting to be a believer and know that in the midst of whatever comes, He has it all under control. We do not have to worry about the storms or the battles. We do not have to worry about how great the shaking is or how high the waves are. He dwells within us and has them all under control.