

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW



Matthew 8:18-22

No Place to Rest His Head

5/5/2024

We are going to turn to Matthew 8 today.

We're working straight through the book of Matthew. At this point in the story, Jesus has just begun teaching and healing and preaching the good news of the kingdom.

I'm sure you could feel the momentum around Jesus. People were astonished at his teaching because of the authority He spoke with. He was healing unhealable diseases, He was rapidly gaining attention at the highest levels of Jewish society, and there's was a rumbling that Jesus just might be the Messiah they were expecting.

But Jesus didn't come to draw a crowd for the crowd's sake. He wasn't after the most possible followers. He was out to make people new, and to make them genuine disciples, or followers of Jesus. But with so much energy around Jesus at this time in the story, He has to work to clarify what it means to be a true disciple of Jesus. These people still have to count the cost, they still have to know what they're signing up for, and Jesus will allow no fine print or deceptive advertising.

So he says some things in today's passage about what it will mean if we're really going to follow Him.

And this is important for us because, if we are looking at current events with an optimistic eye, we may be in the early stages of a revival in appreciation for religion and sometimes Christianity. I can't predict the future, but it seems interest in religion is trending upwards.

People who were prominent public atheists have been making public professions of faith¹. Mark Zuckerberg is not a Christian but recently said he is no longer an atheist because religion brings significant comforts.²

Even staunch atheist Richard Dawkins is still very much an atheist, but recently said, *“I love hymns and Christmas carols and I sort of feel at home in the Christian ethos, and I feel that we are a Christian country in that sense.”* He went on to say, *“So I call myself a cultural Christian and I think it would be truly dreadful if we substituted any alternative religion.”*³

He went on to make clear that He does not believe in Christianity itself - he isn't a Christian.

It seems though that people are increasingly seeing how useful Christianity really is for the world, and how bad things would be without it.

Christianity certainly builds families and societies and productive economies when people live according to its principles. It spawns great works of mercy like building hospitals and digging wells and curing diseases. It spawns great institutions of education - most of the Ivy League schools started out as seminaries. It is difficult to argue with the claim that Christianity is a net good for the world, even taking into account all of its flaws. And it's good for the world whether it's true or not. It works.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_converters_to_Christianity_from_nontheism

² <https://www.businessinsider.com/mark-zuckerberg-more-religious-fatherhood-facebook-issues-2020-1>

³ <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/257276/famous-atheist-richard-dawkins-says-he-considers-himself-a-cultural-christian>

But Christians, followers of Jesus, aren't people who just embrace Christianity because it's useful whether or not it's true. They are people who know it's true, who assent to the claims of Jesus on their lives, and who trust in Jesus Himself. And who even say with the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:9 that if it isn't true, "we are of all people most to be pitied." Because a disciple of Jesus goes all in on Him, and there is a cost.

And there are dangers in turning to Christianity only because it's useful to build better lives for us. There are dangers in a cultural Christianity that's only external.

For one, if it remains external and doesn't go to the hearts of people, it won't last.

CS Lewis wrote that to demand virtue while removing the organ that produces virtue can't work. So when Dawkins says that he likes the effects of Christianity but doesn't believe in Jesus, it's like he's saying that he likes well-oxygenated cells, but doesn't like lungs. Or he likes good circulation but doesn't like the heart.

Lewis wrote:

"We remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful." – C.S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man

So if we take out the heart of world-changing Christianity, faith in Jesus Himself, we will soon lose the effects of the heart - justice and mercy and art and cathedrals and hymns and holidays and hearts of mercy and all the things Dawkins loves will all diminish. Eventually the prodigal son runs out of his Father's money when he runs away.

But an even bigger danger of cultural Christianity that's only external is that we can, like Dawkins, really like the effects of Christianity without knowing Jesus. And we can feel good about that, and Christian enough, without being redeemed.

We can die and go to hell, having lived in a great economy produced by Christian virtues and in a land with great laws and great order and great neighbors. We can have well-ordered families and successful kids. All good stuff to be thankful for, and often the fruit of widespread Christian belief.

But we can gain the whole world and lose our souls.

Jesus can be useful to us, but we don't care whether He's true, and alive, and Savior, and Lord. And we miss out on Him.

Christians are not people who only find Jesus useful, but know that He is God, who is True, and Good, and Beautiful.

So Jesus works to make sure that those who would follow Him, in His day and in ours, have to ask ourselves, "Is following Jesus for Jesus' sake enough? Or will I only follow Jesus because Christianity is useful. It's a good way to meet a spouse, it helps me make friends anywhere I move, he helps me focus on my other goals, he keeps the kids in line, so I am a Christian.

And He reminds us that we should follow Jesus for Jesus' sake through the word, and through the troubles.

It doesn't seem kind when He's doing it, but Jesus will often allow trouble and hardship so our idols can be shaken. So we can be reminded that our ultimate hope isn't that Jesus would fix our external world, our ultimate Hope is Him!

So He allows things around us to fail, dreams to be shattered, hopes to be dashed, comforts to be taken away at times so that we could be sure that we are anchoring our hearts on Jesus. And when we're completely undone by the

external losses, it's his severe mercy to show us the deficiency in our love for HIM.

He allows us to be tested to see if it's still true for us that, in the words of the Heidelberg catechism,

*[My only comfort in life and death is]
That I am not my own,
but belong with body and soul,
both in life and in death,
to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.
He has fully paid for all my sins
with his precious blood,
and has set me free
from all the power of the devil.
He also preserves me in such a way
that without the will of my heavenly Father
not a hair can fall from my head;
indeed, all things must work together
for my salvation.
Therefore, by his Holy Spirit
he also assures me
of eternal life
and makes me heartily willing and ready
from now on to live for him*

It has to be all about Jesus. And when it becomes all about the fringe benefits of following Jesus, we are in danger.

So that's where we pick up:

Matthew 8:18-22

Matthew 8:[18] Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. [19] And a scribe came up and said to him, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” [20] 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.”

[21] Another of the disciples said to him, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” [22] And Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.”

So in verse 19, a scribe comes up to Jesus. The scribes were people who really knew the Bible. But remember that the Old Testament Bible was also the law of the land. So the scribes were often referred to as lawyers. They would do some of what lawyers do today (like draft legal documents,) but they would also interpret their law, which was the Old Testament law. They were also the people who copied the law - writing out by hand copies of the Bible so it could be preserved for generations. They knew the Bible, copied the bible, and practiced law - so they were maybe something like a combination of a lawyer and a pastor and a copy machine.

Matthew 8: [19] And a scribe came up and said to him, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”

Whether it was the teaching of Jesus, the miracles of Jesus, or the clear momentum of this crowd, this scribe wanted to follow Jesus to be on His team. Maybe he thought Jesus was the ticket to more power and prominence, or could help with their politics and overthrow Rome. There were all kinds of possible wrong motives for following Jesus.

But Jesus knew there was some risk to his soul: to come to Jesus for any reason but for Jesus' sake is to not come to Jesus. Jesus isn't the ladder we use to climb to something better, because there is nothing better.

So to strip away any possible false motives, Jesus says:

Matthew 8 [20] 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.”

Jesus calls Himself here the **“Son of Man.”**

This is the first time this title is used of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel, and it is the title He uses to refer to Himself most often. And this title definitely means He is a man Himself. Jesus is true God and true man, a human being through and through.

But this would have meant something more to this Jewish audience. It was a familiar title for them.

Back in their book of Daniel, in chapter 7, Daniel has a vision of God, the Ancient of Days, sitting on a throne. And in Daniel 7:13, Daniel sees this:

Daniel 7:13–14

**[13] “I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
[14] And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.**

So the Son of Man was the one who would have an everlasting kingdom and a dominion that would not pass away. He would be the king of all kings, the One who would finally rule and reign righteously.

And by calling Himself the “Son of Man,” Jesus is saying, “That’s me. I’m the reigning one in Daniel’s vision.”

Which makes it even more striking that Jesus says, “The Son of Man” has no place to *kline*’ - “to rest His head.”

This scribe wants to follow Jesus because He anticipates glory of some sort - some kind of rule and reign. Jesus says, “I am the Son of man, I did come to reign, but I don’t even have a place to rest my head.”

When the Son of Man came, He did reign, but it wasn’t a reign that got Him glory yet, or that got Him political power yet, it was a reign that was first exercised in serving others at a great cost to Himself.

Which tells us something about what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Jesus says, “You want to go where I go. But where I go isn’t a life of comfort and luxury. In fact, it can be such a hard life that sometimes wild animals have it better. Foxes at least have places to live, birds can rest their heads in the nest.

But He says the Son of Man has nowhere to rest His head.

His work is so busy and so intense that He doesn’t even have a house of his own where He can go home in the evenings. It’s like his work is never done, He’s always on the road, accepting the discomforts of the itinerant life to bring the kingdom of God.

And it isn't just the travel schedule. Throughout the ministry of Jesus we see Him in perpetual conflict, constant drama, attacks, opposition, needs of the people that far outweigh anyone's human capacity to meet them. He's often falsely accused, intentionally misunderstood, slandered, mistreated, there are attempts to kill him, He's mocked, and eventually crucified.

Jesus's life is a hard one. He came to serve others, and until that work was done, He wouldn't even have a place to rest his head.

So it's like He said to the scribe, "Are you sure you want to follow me *wherever I go*? Or do you just want to follow me because you thought I would be useful for something?"

And a question for us is, "If Jesus doesn't a better life for us, will we follow? If He doesn't provide comfort, wealth, a great family, a great job, a great reputation in the community - in fact, if Jesus being in our lives hurts us in all of those categories, WILL WE FOLLOW?"

If church friends don't turn out to be good friends. If we have to accept some perpetual stress to follow. If it doesn't seem to work to make the world better, Is HE enough?

If all we get out of Christianity is Jesus, will it be worth it?

Do we follow Jesus because He is beautiful, or just because He is useful?

This is one of the perils of the health, wealth, and prosperity Gospel. It's not wrong that having a Christian worldview can make you more productive: you believe you are supposed to subdue the earth, bring good resources from it, you believe God provides, you believe He has ordained hard work to get things done. People who believe that can produce more - and sometimes be healthier, wealthier, and more prosperous.

But not always in a fallen world. You can do “everything right” and still have things go very wrong.

And, because Jesus is merciful enough to give us enough crisis points to ask ourselves who we are really following, He’ll even allow things to go wrong so we can see ourselves and the true nature of our faith.

And if we followed Jesus just for the fringe benefits, that will inevitably leave us disillusioned, and mad, and feeling lied to by the church when we hit those moments of testing. Those moments when Christianity costs us comforts, and costs us community, costs us some leisure, and costs us a good reputation are his way of saying to us, *“Will you follow me wherever I go?”*

Jesus says that’s what we’re in for:

Matthew 10:24–25 [24] “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. [25] It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

So Jesus came as the Son of Man, or the “master of the house,” and they called him Beelzebul, or Satan. And we can expect that, if we’re following Him, our treatment won’t be better. If the One who is worthy of the most respect receives the least respect, if we follow Him, we can expect that, too.

But aren’t we blessed if we follow Jesus?

Yes! But make sure you carefully define your terms. Jesus was the most blessed man to ever live. And He was blessed by the Father through a hard life that culminated in the cross.

The blessed life wasn't a life of resting his head. It was a hard life, and there, God blessed Him and us.

We'll come back to that thought in a minute.

Matthew 8:[21] Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." [22] And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."

Now another guy comes up to Jesus, and says, "I'll follow you, but I have to bury my father first."

This could mean a couple of things. It could mean his dad just died. And in their day they buried somebody within 24 hours, and then mourned for a week. So this guy is asking for a 1 week leave to go bury his dad, mourn appropriately.

Or, his dad could be elderly, and he needs to help him in his last months and then bury him. So maybe he is asking for a longer leave.

But either way, he is asking for some leave to do a good thing: to care for his family. And Jesus says, probably, "Let the spiritually dead bury the dead."

Following Jesus has to be a higher priority even than our other good and important priorities.

Jesus is certainly pro-family. Scripture calls husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church, to bring up children in the nurture of the Lord. It calls spouses and children blessings.

And Jesus is also all about honoring parents. He says to the Pharisees:

Mark 7:9–13

[9] And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! [10] For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ [11] But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)—[12] then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, [13] thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.” (ESV)

The Pharisees were teaching people that, instead of caring for elderly parents, they should give the money to the temple as an extra offering called Corban. And they’d waive the requirement for them to care for their parents.

But Jesus says, “You can’t waive that requirement!”

So He believes in honoring parents, and doing extra religious things is not more important than that.

But following Jesus is a higher priority than anything else. Even the highest of loyalties should not compare to our loyalty to Jesus. Now I don’t mean our loyalty to the church, to a ministry, to a religious schedule, but to Jesus Himself.

Which will, at times, mean we have to choose our loyalties. A family member chooses a path of sinful living and demands that we affirm their behavior as good. We say, “I will love you, and serve you, and be kind to you, but I can’t affirm that as good.” And it might cost relationships.

Or a mom or dad gets totally offended because of our new-found adherence to Christianity. “Was your upbringing not good enough for you?” And it may

break their heart that we follow Jesus. But He is where our highest loyalty lies.

There's a danger in following Jesus for the fringe benefits, there's a danger in thinking it will life will always go better because Jesus is in it.

But there's a ditch on the other side of the road. And that is that we become morose, or live with our minds set on how much we lose, how hard we have it, what we have sacrificed.

Because what we gain in Christ far outweighs the loss.

Matthew 13:44-46 **““The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”**

Two small stories of two people who find treasure, and seeing the value of that treasure, sell all they have to get it. And they do it, not all morose over what they're losing, but in joy over what they're gaining! Jesus is the treasure hidden in field, Jesus is the pearl of great price.

Yes, we lose a lot to follow Jesus. But it is not alot in comparison to Who we gain!

We're going all-in, betting everything we have on one Stock. But it's a stock with guaranteed, infinite returns. We may feel the pinch now, but look at the payoff!

We have Jesus. A Savior, who though He is God, accepted the chaos and pain of this life to bring redemption to us. Who loves like that?

You lose a lot to follow Jesus, but who would love you like Jesus?

Jesus gave his whole life, so that as a free gift, we could receive forgiveness and everlasting life if we believe in His work on the cross.

He accepted a life with no place to rest His head until His work was done. What a great Savior.

In fact, in John 19, Jesus is on the cross, where He has spent hours being tortured to pay for our sin. He has accepted not only a hard life, but the hardest possible death in our place for our redemption.

John 19:30 “When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, 'It is finished,' and he bowed his head (KLINE) and gave up his spirit.”

Jesus finished His work, and then - He rested his head. This was the work He came to do for us, and when it was completely done, He rested his head on that cross.

And three days later, He rose again.

And as followers of Jesus, we follow where He goes! Through a hard life of losses - with joy because of the one we gained, but losses nonetheless. And then we die. And, we go where He goes, so we rise again.

And at that moment, with the pain over with our heads rested, we'll recognize the value of the pearl. Nobody then will say Christianity just makes my life harder.

Matthew 16:24-25 [24] Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. [25] For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (ESV)

We will find it! We will lose our lives to follow Jesus, but we'll take them up again just like Jesus did.

Prayer of Confession:

Father, we come to you acknowledging the ways in which we have faltered in our commitment to follow Jesus wholeheartedly. Forgive us, Father, for the times when we have sought after external benefits or comforts or societal approval rather than seeking Jesus Himself as the ultimate source of truth and life. We confess that we have often been tempted to view Christianity merely as a means to achieve some other end rather than embracing Jesus as our Savior and Lord.

Jesus, we thank you that even though you are the Son of Man who reigns over all things, you gave up your comforts and came to die in our place. Thank you that you accepted the pain and loss of the cross for the joy set before you.

Spirit, in response, Help us to take up our crosses daily, following in the footsteps of Jesus even when the path is difficult and uncertain. Lead us in paths of righteousness, that we may live lives worthy of our calling as followers of Christ, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

Assurance:

Romans 8:1 **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”**

Sermon Discussion Questions:

- 1) What reasons might we be tempted to follow Jesus other than a genuine commitment to Him? How do we know our motives are right?

- 2) How does Jesus's grouping of the teaching that He is the Son of Man with the teaching that He has no place to lay His head challenge our notions of success?
- 3) How do Christians navigate the tension between an ultimate commitment to Christ and duties to our families?
- 4) How do we prepare for adversity so we don't feel ripped off when the Christian life doesn't "go well?"