

## “Do You Really Want to Be a Disciple?”

Matthew 8:18-22

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Let's say you have a cousin in Los Angeles who is thinking about moving to the Iron Range. She and her husband have never lived here and have only visited Minnesota in the summer. But they want to move to a small town to raise their family. They are a really nice Christian couple, and you would love to have them come.

She calls and asks you, “What is it like to live in Northern Minnesota?” You list a number of advantages of small-town life, no traffic jams or drive by shootings, economical housing, lots of lakes and trees. And of course, you would tell them about what a wonderful church Chisholm Baptist is.

What would you say about the weather? Maybe nothing. Or you might talk about the fantastic summers, spectacular falls, and much anticipated springs. If they asked about winter, you would tell them about the wonderfully mild one we just enjoyed. If pressed you could acknowledge that some of our winters are pretty cold and snowy but would note they are good for building character.

Folks, whenever we are trying to persuade someone to do something we want them to do, we almost always accentuate the positive and minimize the negative. Whether we are trying to convince someone to move to Northern Minnesota, or our spouse to go shopping with us, or a neighbor to buy our old car, we tend not to mention the reason why the other person might not want to do what we would like them to do.

Thus, it comes as somewhat of a surprise when we read our text today, Matthew 8:18-22. Here Jesus seems to take a very different approach. The Lord clearly wants people to trust, follow and obey Him. Yet, He appears to go out of His way to make it clear this is not an easy thing to do. As we look at this difficult, but important passage of scripture, let's as God to help us understand His word and correctly apply it to our lives today.

**Matthew 8:18** Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. Crowds, big crowds of followers, are something that delights most political or religious

leaders. In fact, some pastors seem almost obsessed with attracting more and more people to attend their church. They often focus on entertaining the crowd to keep them coming back each Sunday. But not Jesus, He decides to head for the other side of the lake in order to separate those committed to following Him, from those just casually interested. He expects that the first group will follow Him to the other side, while the others will just return to their homes. Matthew then records Jesus' conversation with two individuals who plan on sticking with Jesus.

The first is a Jewish religious scholar, a scribe or teacher of the law. Throughout the gospels, these folks are usually not very friendly to Jesus, but this one says to Him, **Matthew 8:19b** “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” Now he probably means “I will go with you to the other side of the lake,” rather than “I pledge my lifelong devotion.”

By addressing Jesus as teacher, it likely indicates this man is interested in an academic relationship with Jesus. He wants to be Jesus' student. He has a lot of questions he would like to ask. That is not bad, at all. Yet, it is quite different from being a disciple, committed not just to Jesus' ideas but to following Him.

Jesus replies, **Matthew 8:20b** “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” In other words, “Are you sure you want to follow me wherever I go? It is not going to be very easy. I am not a typical Rabbi. I don't ever have a bed to sleep in. If you really follow me, you might not either.” I would not call Jesus a “homeless person.” His lack of housing is a choice. Jesus often stayed at the homes of Peter and the other disciples, and we have no reason to think His family was especially poor. Yet, His itinerant lifestyle meant He was always living out of a suitcase of pack. He had no home of His own.

A second man comes to Jesus and says, **Matthew 8:21b** “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” In other words, he seems to say, “Lord, I would follow you to the other side of the lake,

but my dad's funeral is today." Now, this man is called a disciple, He calls Jesus, "Lord," but there is a question about the degree or extent of his commitment. Jesus replies, **Matthew 8:22** **"Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."**

Now, that seems like a pretty harsh reply. In our culture, people often get at least three days off from work if a parent dies, and in first century Israel a person was to be buried within 24 hours of his/her death. It doesn't seem unreasonable for this man to request a day or two at home before he rejoins Jesus.

However, many commentaries believe the phrase "bury my father," likely meant, "take care of my father until he dies." So, what he is probably really saying is, "Jesus my dad is getting old. He will die within a few years. How about if I just take care of him now, and when he is gone, then I will follow you again." The man is maybe asking for an indefinite postponement in following Jesus.

Again, there is nothing extraordinary in this request. In Jewish society it was clearly the responsibility of a son to take care of his dad as he got older. To fail to care for an elderly parent would be totally against what society expected. Certainly, some people would say, "What a terrible son. He is off following that Jesus around the country, when his poor old dad is sick at home."

Yet, Jesus tells him that being a disciple, following Jesus, sometimes takes priority over even family obligations. "Leave the dead to bury their own dead," likely means that those who are spiritually dead, those who are not my disciples, will focus on all the mundane, everyday responsibilities. As a disciple, you know there are more important things in life."

Jesus' words are probably meant to be provocative. He wants to get our attention. I think He would say, "Yes, most times the best way to honor Me is by fulfilling the normal responsibilities to your family. But it doesn't always work that way. There may be times that you will have to choose between Me and your family. And if you want to be my disciple, when those times come, you must be willing to choose

Me ahead of your family. That is not easy. But it is what a disciple of Jesus does."

I find it a bit surprising that Matthew does not tell us how either of these potential followers of Jesus respond to His words. Did the scribe say, "Well Jesus if you don't have a place for me to sleep, I guess I will just have to find another teacher." Or did he say, "I don't care what the accommodations are, you are the one I want to follow."

Did the second fellow say, "Well Jesus, if that is the way it has to be, you will have to go on without me." Or did he say, "You are right Jesus. I will get someone else to take care of my dad. I'm coming with you." The choice of whether or not to follow Jesus is the most important decision either of these men will ever make. I cannot make a judgement about their eternal destiny, but anyone who purposely chooses not to follow Jesus, clearly puts his/her soul in grave danger.

So why are we not told which choices they make? Well, it seems Matthew's and the Lords real concern is not with these two men, but is rather helping those who read this passage, including folks in Northern Minnesota in 2024, to be true disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus makes it clear to us that is not easy to be a disciple. Yet, He has also told us that if we choose not to follow Him, we will have deep and eternal regrets. Our text today, contains a very important implied warning for those claiming to trust and follow Jesus, but who are on a pretty easy path. We better make sure we have not taken a wrong turn.

If you are following Jesus, there will be some landmarks along the way, things that will help you know you are on the right path. When I give directions to someone about how to get to our church, I often say, "We are behind the Iron Man statue." If there is no Iron Man, it's the wrong church.

The two landmarks of following Jesus highlighted in this passage are a sacrifice of personal comfort and going against the expectations of other people. That is what disciples of Jesus would do. So, friends, if you never find yourself having to do something for the sake of Jesus you don't really enjoy, if you are never misunderstood by other

people because of your faith, then you should ask yourself: Am I really following Jesus? Am I really trusting Him? Or am I just going through the motions of being a “good person,” a good person who is not really a disciple of Jesus?

Let’s take a closer look at these landmarks. As Americans we tend almost worship comfort. Many pastors wear polo shirts on Sunday morning instead of a coat and tie because it is more comfortable. Of course, during the week I am sometimes out and about wearing sweatpants and crocs, when I probably should be dressed up a little more, but it is so comfortable. I like to sit in my comfortable recliner, and sleep in my comfortable bed.

Is that wrong? No, but the high value on comfort may be. I think of some of our global partners, like Viju and Jenna, or Chris and Steph. It is so hot and humid in India. It is so hot and dusty in North Africa. Why would anyone choose to live there instead of Wisconsin or Minnesota? Well, you would choose to live in places like that, as these two couples have done, if that is where God has called you to go, and following Jesus is more important to you than your own comfort.

Oh, the Lord may not call you to serve Him in a place like India or North Africa. He may not even call you to go to a comfortable place like Switzerland. But there will be times when He calls each of us, as a disciple of Jesus, to sacrifice our personal comfort in some way, for the sake of His kingdom.

Maybe you are planning on buying a new boat for this summer. That would be nice for you and your family. But you cannot stop thinking about how the camp is trying to raise money so more boys and girls can go to Bible camp this summer. You realize if you take the money you have saved up and give it to the camp, the old boat can probably do for one more season.

Or maybe there is a young mom who is just getting worn out and she cannot afford to hire a babysitter. Watching toddlers is not really the thing you like to do, but you realize that is a way you can serve her and honor the Lord. Or maybe God is calling you to set your alarm clock just 15 minutes earlier each day so you will have a block

of time to pray for different people and different needs in this church.

Friends, I don’t know what it will be, but I do believe if you are a disciple of Jesus, someone trusting and following Him, there will be times when He will ask you to sacrifice your personal comfort in some way so that you can better honor Him and serve the people around you.

That is not really fun. We like the things that make us comfortable. But when the Lord calls you to give up something, you better be willing to do so. And the good news is, if you do that, you will eventually be very glad that you did.

A second landmark on the road of following Jesus is being misunderstood by other people. There will be times when a choice you make as a disciple just won’t make sense to someone around you. This may happen when you choose the career into which you believe God is leading you. Maybe you decide to work in youth ministry and your parents cannot understand why you don’t get a “real job.” Or it might be leaving your boss totally perplexed when you refuse to “shade the truth” just a bit when selling a particular product.

It may happen at school or work when you start talking about your faith in Jesus. People might ridicule you and someone will say, “Hey, leave the religion stuff at church.” Or maybe it is your boyfriend or girlfriend who says, “I thought you loved me. What do you mean we shouldn’t be having sex yet?”

I don’t know how it will happen. I just know that if you are really following Jesus, He will sometimes ask you to do things that other people won’t really understand. And when He does, you need to be willing to do it. Friends, if you are going through life never having any of these conflicts, if you always do just what other people expect you to do, that may be a sign that you are not really following Jesus.

Folks, to be a disciple to trust and follow Jesus involves commitment, something which is often viewed as out of style in our day. Many folks are willing to do something as long as it fits with their agenda or as long as they find it personally fulfilling. Someone said, many people want to serve the Lord, but in an advisory capacity. Jesus,

however, desires disciples who are willing to follow Him wherever He leads, who will keep going even when the path is not easy. He wants us to be disciples who are committed.

There is a story of a chicken and a pig who were discussing what they could do to help a poor family. The chicken suggested they provided eggs and bacon for them so they could enjoy a good breakfast. The pig responded, "Well, I don't know. For you, an egg and bacon breakfast only requires a contribution. For me it requires full commitment."

Folks, the church today could use more pigs and fewer chickens. In the world in which we live, so dark and confused, where so many are without hope and without God, the Lord desires that we be disciples who are committed to following Him wherever He leads.

Now, some of you may be thinking, "I don't know Pastor Dan, I think I will sign up for a contribution, not commitment. I like my comfortable life and my family and friends are very important to me. I think I will forget about this disciple stuff and just be a plain, ordinary Christian."

Friends, I don't think Jesus gives you that option. It is easy to get confused because the New Testament uses the word "disciple" in a couple of different ways. Sometimes we talk about the 12 disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, John, etc., the men who would become the 12 apostles. Other times, however, "disciple" refers to any follower of Jesus, to anyone who believes in Jesus, to anyone who is a Christian.

**Acts 11:26b** says, **In Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.** This doesn't refer to the apostles, but to a group of ordinary Christians. One Bible commentator says, "The New Testament writers do not know of a Christian who is not a disciple, who is not a follower of Jesus."

Now, this is not the basis of your salvation. A Christian is saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone for the glory of God alone. It is righteousness of Jesus, graciously given to you by God, which saves you and makes you a Christian, not your willingness to follow and obey the Lord.

But... those who are trusting Jesus, have been made alive and are indwelt by God's Spirit. The Bible says we are born of God or born again. And one of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to help us follow Jesus, to help us be His disciples.

In fact, you will never be able to follow Jesus unless the Spirit enables you to do that. And friends, I will just say if you have no desire to do so, if you are committed to staying on the path you want to follow, rather than the one the Lord is calling you to travel, that raises some serious questions about the reality of your faith.

Oh, I am not the judge, God is. He knows whether your faith is real or not. But as I said a few weeks ago, if you have zero desire to live in a way that pleases the Lord, it certainly raises the question about whether your faith in Jesus is real or not.

And I also know that when I stand before the Lord, I don't want to be a person who says, "Sorry, Jesus, I really was more committed to enjoying life than following you. And frankly, my friends and family were really more important to me than you were." Those are not words I want to speak, and I don't think you do either.

So, our conclusion today is very simple. If you are not a Christian, a believer in Jesus, if you are not trusting in Him, it is time to start. That means you need to turn away from self-confidence and self-reliance, and put your trust in the Lord Jesus. If you are not sure what that means, let's make sure we talk real soon. If you are already a Christian, if you know your faith is genuine, but you have been pretty erratic in following Jesus, it is time to make some changes.

As God's Spirit enables, confess that sin to the Lord, experience His gracious forgiveness and leave this room today ready to follow Jesus wherever He leads you.

And let me close with one important reminder: When you do that, when you choose to follow the Lord, in the end, you will have no regrets. Following Jesus won't always be easy, but it will be worth it.

Remember what Jesus said in **Mark 10:29, 30** **"Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has**

**left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.”**

Friends, if you believe that, it should cause you to say, “Yes, Lord, I really do want to be your disciple.”