

**Jesus' Authority Over His Disciples**  
**Matthew 8:18-22**  
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Matthew 8-9 provides us with the account of ten miracles that serve to prove the authority of Jesus over all. Matthew 8:18-22 falls between the first set of three miracles (8:1-17) and the second set of three miracles (8:23-9:8).

- Miracles of healing (8:1-17)
  - Jesus' authority over His disciples (8:18-22)
- Miracles of power (8:23-9:8)
  - Jesus' authority over His opponents (9:9-17)
- Miracles of restoration (9:19-34)

These miracles are structured thematically, rather than chronologically, separated by interactions to show the authority of Jesus. Matthew 8:18-22 focuses on the nature of truly following Jesus with an illustration of two very different attitudes that will serve as barriers to discipleship.

This section is importantly placed among this section on miracles to teach that Jesus has authority over not only the sickness that afflicts mankind, but over mankind themselves. All who follow Him must recognize His ultimate authority over all and must not seek Him on their terms but upon His. To only seek for miraculous deliverance does not make one a true follower of Jesus.

**The eager disciple (8:18-20)**

Jesus' miracles had large crowds that followed Him from the outset of His public ministry. *"The news about Him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan."* (Matthew 4:24-25).

These crowds required Jesus to adapt His ministry at certain times. This was done because Jesus' ministry was to both the multitudes and to the disciples (both the twelve and the larger group). In order to teach the disciples about the meaning of true discipleship, Jesus needed to escape the pressing crowds. The disciples were to be brought to the other side of the Sea of Galilee for this purpose.

One outcome of the movement of Jesus away from the shore and the crowds was how it set up later miracles. The account of the calming of the storm in Matthew 8:23-27 occurs because of this impending boat ride across the Sea of Galilee. Also, once on the other side, they encountered the two demon-possessed men (8:28-34).

Before the departure by Jesus and the disciples in the boat, Matthew 8:19 describes the discussion between Jesus and a scribe with a professed desire to be a follower of Christ. This desire was expressed because apparently there was not room for the man in the boat with the other disciples. Without room in the boat, Jesus would leave the man on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, without knowledge of where Jesus may even be going. Thus his expressed interest in following Jesus necessitated there being room in the boat for him.

As a scribe, he was not only responsible for legal documents of various types in his locality, he would be considered a legal expert on the Jewish Law and traditions. He was a professional bureaucrat who would be involved in recording, teaching, ruling and even at times enforcement of the traditions of the Jewish society.

The scribe “came up” to Jesus, initiating the dialogue with Christ. His status as a professional teacher of the Law makes his desire to follow Jesus noteworthy, particularly in his address of Jesus as “teacher.” This demonstrates his willingness to view Jesus as beyond himself in knowledge of the Law and in the skill of communication. It is certainly a term of respect, even if it falls short of acknowledging Christ’s full authority. This scribe simply saw Jesus as someone who had much to teach him.

The expression “*I will follow You wherever you go*” is the recognition that this scribe does not know where Jesus is going in the boat. His willingness to prioritize the learning from Jesus regardless of the geographical location was a plea to allow him access to a spot in the boat. This man was a disciple in the simplest sense of being a follower of Jesus. He had followed Jesus to this point and wished to continue.

The term “disciple” in the Bible often means one who is merely a follower, typically (but not exclusively, cf. John 1:35) of Jesus.. As a follower, it connotes one who is learning from the one that is being followed. This does not necessarily reference salvation of a disciple who is following Jesus.

Indeed, being a disciple of Jesus can even be something short of true saving faith, as can be seen Matthew 8:21. Also, this is seen in John 6:66, “*as a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.*” Judas Iscariot is another example of a disciple who did not possess true faith unto salvation.

Therefore, when the scribe wished to continue as a follower, or disciple of Christ, Jesus addressed what being a true follower would entail. Because “*the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head,*” followers of Jesus would not enjoy the comforts of reliable housing that this scribe was accustomed to. Jesus was an itinerant preacher, moving from place to place and unlike even animals, He had no regular dwelling place.

In Jesus’ description of the traveling nature of His instruction, He used the term “*Son of Man,*” which is the first occurrence of this phrase in this Gospel out of a total of thirty times it is used in Matthew. As an expert in the Old Testament, the scribe would be familiar with this term.

In Daniel 7:13-14, this phrase is specifically messianic, “*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. 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.*” Therefore, by using this title for Himself, Jesus is declaring that He is the Messiah of Israel.

It is unlikely that the scribe, like most others who heard this phrase for the first time by Jesus, would have understood what Jesus meant. This is partially due to the expectations of the scribe and partially because the phrase “*Son of Man*” is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to refer to mankind generically (cf. John 25:6; Psalm 8:4; 80:17). In Ezekiel, the term is used of the prophet as a frail, mortal man. This explains why Jesus continued to use this term since it identified Him as the Messiah from Daniel 7:13-14 and would also emphasize His humanity, which would be a common heretical view of Him in the early church age.

Importantly, Jesus did not specifically encourage the scribe or discourage the scribe. He only described for him what would be involved in continuing to follow Christ. Jesus gave the man the information without a plea to act on it or to make room for him in the boat.

This eager disciple sought to follow Jesus without either a full understanding of what following Jesus would involve, or without a full understanding of who he sought to follow. He was a legal expert with superficial enthusiasm, likely based upon the teaching and miracles that he found amazing (cf. Matthew 7:28-29). The reader of Matthew's Gospel would come to this one conclusion, that the scribe had eagerness without understanding the significance of truly following Jesus.

The statement of Christ regarding true discipleship is particularly important in the present age of superficial professions of faith without an understanding of the meaning of what such faith involves. True Christians are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, who holds authority over their lives. There is no promise of prosperity, comfort, or ease in this lifetime.

Any ministry approach that involves begging people to follow Jesus, promises of earthly blessings, emotional manipulations or omitting our responsibility to the authority of Christ, risks telling people they are true believers when they are merely using God to serve themselves. This explains how common it is to find people who professed to have followed Jesus but no longer do so, yet consider themselves to be Christians. There are many like this scribe who are eager to learn from Jesus, but on their terms and only to a point.

### **The hesitant disciple (8:21-22)**

The second case that Matthew presents of discipleship involves a man who also expressed a desire to follow Jesus but without a full understanding of what was involved as a disciple of Christ. This man is only identified as "*another of the disciples*," indicating that the first man was also a disciple and that both men were in the process of following Jesus. As with the scribe, this man's discipleship was likewise superficial and temporary.

This second man addressed Jesus as "Lord," which was another term of respect, like the word "sir," without necessarily understanding the full meaning of Jesus' authority that this word requires. The boat was preparing to launch and this man sought an exception that would allow him to follow at a later date (rather than a request to delay the journey of the boat).

Many who read Matthew 8:21 believe that this man's father was not even dead. This is based upon the fifth commandment to "honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16). Many do not believe that Jesus would have actually forbidden this man from performing the task of burying his father.

While theoretically possible, the straight-forward reading of the text leads to the conclusion that both the man and Jesus considered the father to be actually dead. If the father was dead, there is a sense that this man would have had some degree of responsibility in the burial process, thus leading many to believe that his request was valid and should have been granted by Jesus.

Yet Jesus commands this disciple to “*follow Me.*” This clearly prioritizes the man’s responsibility as a follower of Christ over his responsibility as a son. The urgency of following Jesus is greater than the urgency to fulfill any family duties. The command to follow implies that unlike the scribe earlier, this man’s place in the boat had been secured. He was looking to renounce his opportunity to continue to follow Jesus for the purpose of burying his father.

In a sense, this person had the opposite problem of the scribe. The first disciple was too quick to promise wholehearted allegiance to Christ while this second disciple was too slow to perform wholehearted allegiance to Christ. He valued the responsibility he felt to his father over the responsibility he should have felt to his Lord.

This prioritization of commitment to Jesus over commitment to family is seen in the response by Jesus when He said “*Follow Me, and allow the dead to bury their own dead.*” Since physically dead people cannot bury physically dead people, this statement must mean those who are spiritually dead should bury the physically dead. Those who are spiritually alive must place their allegiance to following Christ above their allegiance to their family.

If our family is truly spiritually alive then they will prioritize following Jesus above all else. This concept of commitment to Jesus over family was taught by Jesus in other places in the Gospels:

*“He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:37).*

*“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29).*

*“If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26).*

Just as with the first disciple who was unwilling to renounce the comforts of his life to follow Jesus, this disciple was unwilling to renounce the connection to his family to follow Jesus. Just as the first disciple is relevant to the difficulty that people have leaving the substance of their present life to follow Jesus, this second disciple is relevant to the difficulty people have leaving the security of their family to follow Jesus.

As people seek to follow Jesus to make their lives better without a willingness to submit to His authority, people seek to also follow Jesus to make their family better without a willingness to follow Jesus. People view the moral teaching of Jesus as helpful in raising a family, people view the relationships of a church as helpful in raising a family, and people view the protection of a church from worldly influences as helpful in raising a family.

As with both our own lives and with our own family, we have a responsibility to Christ to serve Him selflessly. We do not follow Christ in order to get Him to do what we want for ourselves and we do not follow Christ in order to get Him to do what we want for our family.

## **Conclusion**

As Jesus taught, those who have left people and material possessions behind for the sake of following Jesus will be rewarded by the Lord. *“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life”* (Matthew 19:29).

The first disciple of Matthew 8:18-20 was unwilling to abandon the comforts of home life for the rigors of following Jesus without the sense of security that a home provides. The second disciple of Matthew 8:21-22 was unwilling to abandon the relationships of his family for the relationship with Christ. Both faced obstacles that hindered following Jesus.

The lesson in these cases involves the authority of Jesus over our lives. No security of location should cause us to shrink back from following Jesus and no significant relationship should cause us to shrink back from following Jesus. He deserves full commitment over all competing interests. The disciples of Christ left their previous lives, including the occupation and existing relationships in order to follow Christ, ultimately to the ends of the earth. We must be equally willing to do the same since he who wishes to save his life shall lose it (Matthew 16:24-26).