THE COST

When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he commanded his disciples to go across to the other side {of the lake}. And a Torah scholar came to him and said: "Teacher, I want to follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him: "Foxes have their lairs and the birds of the sky their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." And 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 those who are dead look after the dead."
Matthew 8:18-22

By making mention of the lake here, Matthew is most likely setting up the account where Jesus calms the sea in just a few verses. In the passage, however, discipleship is the main crux that Matthew is driving at. The above text is about disciples and discipleship.

What we are reading then is theological messaging about Jesus himself and the demand that is being made to follow him.

Another thing to consider in this passage is that this is first time in Matthew's gospel that we encounter the designation *"Son of Man."*

When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he commanded his disciples to go across to the other side {of the lake}.
Matthew 8:18

This verse would fit very naturally into the next passage in Matthew regarding the storm upon the sea:

When Jesus saw the crowd around him, <u>he commanded his disciples</u> to go across to the other side {of the lake}. And when he got into the boat, <u>his disciples followed him</u>.
Matthew 8:18, 23

However, the reason I believe Matthew places it here is revealed by the underscored phrases above. Jesus is teaching about discipleship and this interruption of the flow regarding the sea offers an opportunity for teaching to take place.

Note that Jesus *commanded his disciples* in v. 18. Then, when v.23 comes back to the story of crossing the sea, we are told *his disciples followed him.*

Between these two examples of obedience, we find the account of two would-be disciples, one who states that he will *follow Jesus wherever he goes.*

Thus, though apparently besieged by the crowd and desiring to escape the press, Jesus commands his disciples and it is here that the stage is set for the radical call that discipleship to Jesus demands.

What is worthy of note is that Matthew uses the phrase that *Jesus commanded his disciples* with intention, thus reveling to us the authority Jesus has and also linking that authority to the difficulty that discipleship is going to demand in this account.

> *And a Torah scholar came to him and said: "Teacher, I want to follow you wherever you go."*
> *Matthew 8:19*

Matthew uses the description *"Torah scribe"* to identify this man which just might give us insight into the tradition he is following here since Luke's account of this event makes no such mention. It could also be that Matthew is assuming the man is a Torah scribe from the crowd who was sufficiently impressed with the teaching of Jesus on the mount that he approached him in amazement.

The man is not yet a disciple, but it seems obvious he has aspirations to become one.

A scribe of the time was a professional Torah scholar and this would indeed, stir in him an interest in what Jesus had been teaching.

He addresses Jesus as *teacher* which need not be viewed as condescending but rather as a proper address given his standing. There were those in the religious persuasion of Judaism who did indeed use this phrase in a condescending manner.

> *And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your <u>teacher</u> eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*
> *Matthew 9:11*

> *Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "<u>Teacher</u>, we wish to see a sign from you."*
> *Matthew 12:38*

> *And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "<u>Teacher</u>, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances."*
> *Matthew22:16*

Furthermore, there is a clear tendency by Matthew that avoids having the disciples address Jesus as teacher whereas Mark allows for such assignation.

> *The scribe, according to Matthew's storyline, perhaps overhearing the command to cross the sea, expresses readily (perhaps too readily) his unqualified willingness to follow Jesus wherever he is going at that time, and by implication, also in the future.*
> *Hagner – Matthew, page 216*

(Hagner speculates the man's ongoing and future intentions from the Greek word
ὅπου "wherever" which carries an indefinite boundary)

The scribe says that he wants to *follow* Jesus wherever he will *go. Follow* and *go* are key words in the biblical vocabulary of discipleship.

To Jesus, however, discipleship means more than just a willingness to follow. It carries a greater weight than a mere accompanying of someone or a willingness to listen and learn from someone or to live with that person as the students of the rabbis did.

What this scribe is going to find out is that Jesus demands a total lifestyle commitment.

This scribe reflects good Jewish practice in choosing his teacher, however, throughout the gospel narrative, it is Jesus who consistently initiates the disciple-master relationship. This may be the reason for the seemingly off-putting response Jesus gives the scribe.

And Jesus said to him: "Foxes have their lairs and the birds of the sky their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."
Matthew 8:20

Note that Jesus expands the scribe's concept of following by saying that it is an urgent, nomadic and even homeless ministry. Doubtless the scribe was not expecting his response.

Jesus means that this ministry for him and for the disciples who follow him is a ministry of self-denial and not a life of autonomy.

Foxes have lairs and birds have nests – is a common teaching style used by Jesus where he takes the everyday things of life to make his point. And that point is that even what the foxes and the birds have is denied to Jesus and be extension, to those who follow him.

A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. 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.
Matthew 10:24-25

Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.
Psalm 84:3

Jesus is of course, using hyperbole here, but the truth of the matter for those desiring to follow him, is that such a life will be one of difficulty, loneliness, and exclusion.

And 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 those who are dead look after the dead."
Matthew 8:21-22

Note that Matthew tells his readers that this is another of Jesus' disciples and we can be sure that what is meant is not one of the Twelve. Most likely, this is someone from the larger crowd that was following after him.

The use of *another* also could tell us that the Torah scholar *also came from* the larger group of the crowd.

Matthew may be hinting to us that both of these men are *leaning* toward being disciples, yet they are only now beginning to grasp the demands that such a designation brings.

This disciple makes no statement as the first did concerning his willingness to go wherever Jesus goes but rather makes a request anyone would consider reasonable and especially anyone understanding of Jewish custom.

Truly, the burial of a father by the son was required by Torah.

'My father made me swear, saying, "I am about to die: in my tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me." Now therefore, let me please go up and bury my father. Then I will return.'"
Genesis 50:5

So he called for his son Tobias, and Tobias came to him. Tobit said to him: "Give me a proper burial. Honor your mother and take care of her as long as she lives. Do what pleases her and don't grieve her spirit in any matter.
Tobit 4:3
My child, let your tears flow for the dead; as one who is suffering terribly, give voice to your sorrow. Lay out their bodies in accordance with their wishes, and don't neglect their burial.
Sirach 38:16

In fact, burial of the dead superseded even religious duties.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them, No one shall make himself unclean for the dead among his people, except for his closest relatives, his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother,
Leviticus 21:1-2

Priests were allowed the defilement of touching the dead in the case of close family members. In fact, not to do so would violate the command of God.

It seems that Jesus in his response denies the legitimacy of such a delay.

Honor your father and your mother, that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.
Exodus 20:12

The sum total of this commandment would be found in the taking care of one's parents until death, therefore, for the son to ask to bury his father is not a minor request.

In the case of the Nazarite vow, however, there is an exception. This is a case where one devotes themselves to God and are therefore not allowed under any circumstances – even the death of a parent – to come in contact with the dead body.

"All the days that he separates himself to the Lord he shall not go near a dead body. Not even for his father or for his mother, for brother or sister, if they die, shall he make himself unclean, because his separation to God is on his head.
Numbers 6:6-7

The exception of the Nazarite is important to understand as we move through this passage.

Often the response of Jesus is softened. Though his response should bother us as it appears to be law-breaking and even cruel, such is not the case.

The truth of his response is actually a matter of mercy when one recalls that in just a few short years, it will be Jesus as the one who will find himself in need of burial.

So, we have Jesus here on the road telling a son to set aside the law's requirements and instead, to come and follow him. There must have been more than a few people asking themselves as they heard his response, "Who is this Jesus?"

To be sure, this account, as indeed all of Matthew's accounts, is not about the son but Jesus.

If the reality is that Jesus is telling the son to follow regardless of his parental obligations, one would need to ask, *"Does Jesus outrank the Fifth Commandment?"*

To arrive with the answer, we need to look back some eight hundred years earlier when a similar incident took place on another road.

[19] So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. [20] And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" [21] And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him.
1 Kings 19:19-21

When Elijah threw his cloak upon Elisha, it was a call for him to follow the prophet.

Luke records an account of two men just like the story in Matthew. Interestingly, note Luke's use of the similar reason given by this would-be follower and the words of Elisah.

> *59 To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." 60 And Jesus[a] said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." 61 Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." 62 Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*
> *Luke 9:59-62*

Luke draws our attention back to the Elijah and Elisah story in his account of this son and another disciple who want to follow Jesus. This is certain given the fact that Elisha was plowing in the field when he responded to Elijah's call and Jesus tells the man who desires to follow him:

"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

When Elisha told the prophet of his desire to kiss his father and mother (note again the allusion to the 5th Commandment), Elijah could not stop nor demand anything more from him.

Jesus, however, is the Greater than Eliajh. He is the Incarnate God to whom one under the Nazarite vow was given exception under the Law from keeping parental obligations.

What must be understood in this context is that the father of this son is not dead. In the first century, due to the hot and dry climate and Jewish law, the body of dead person needed to be buried that same day before sunset.

There would be preparations made and a funeral procession would move through the streets to the burial site with the son being the chief person in the funeral.

> *22 "And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, 23 his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance. Deuteronomy 21:22-23*

This passage reveals to us that body should not be left unburied that day but also serves to point to the burial of Jesus who was hung on a tree and why it was that the religious leaders were so concerned that he be taken down and buried that day.

The burial of Jesus has everything to do with the passage we are studying today.

The son's request then was not a denial to follow Jesus but a delay to follow him.

We have two possibilities to the sons' request.

1) He wanted to fulfill his parental obligations until at some point in the future his father died.

2) He was speaking of the *secondary burial*. This custom was that after a year of the body being buried, the family, in this case the son, would remove the bones and place them for permanent burial in an ossuary. This would be the son's final duty to his father.

This account should call our attention the important calling Jesus placed upon James and John in chapter 4. Note that Jesus calls the brothers while they are working with their father and yet, hearing his invitation, they leave their father in the boat; a father who would have been their obligation by law to care for.

> *21 And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.*
>
> *Matthew 4:21-22*

By asking for time to bury his father, the son was not saying no, but later. To Jesus, saying later is a dangerous path for one to follow.

let those who are dead look after the dead – could be translated as *let the spiritually dead bury their physically dead.* It carries the meaning of letting the world that is passing, letting the world that is dying officiate to the business of those dying in the world.

What Jesus is telling the son is something akin to *"Let those who dig graves bury the dead, but you, follow the Kingdom that has broken into that dying world. Come follow the living."*

Moses and Elijah could not speak like this. They could not implore someone to follow them and override the duty the law demanded of a son to his father. But Jesus could override one's duty.

What Jesus could see that everyone else could not was that in a short time he himself would be crucified and be one of the dead in a dying world. Rome did not allow the crucified to be buried with rapidity. A body could stay on a cross for days as a message.

Ironically it was Joseph and Nicodemus who followed Jewish burial protocols and asked for the body of Jesus, took it down from the cross and then placed it in the tomb.

Truly, they carried seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes, a burial fit for a king.

In effect, they fulfilled the Jewish law as a son to a father with a tender and honoring burial.

Understand, Jesus is not against funeral or burial rites. To him this is a matter of time.

Jesus knew at the time of the encounter with this son that a day was soon coming when a burial would be temporary. This is evidenced by the grave clothes left in his tomb.

6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, 7 and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus'[a] head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.
John 20:6-7

Life had indeed broken into the realm of the dead and into death and this is the reality that Jesus could see as he stood on the road with the son. He understood where he was walking to and knew what he was soon going to do to conquer death itself.

When he told the son to let the dead bury their dead, he knew that the entire institution of death: the tombs, the funeral processions, the grief, and the ossuaries, the entire machinery of death that humans created to manage the one enemy they could never defeat was about to be demoted.

Jesus was soon going to turn every cemetery into a waiting room.

The son wanted to get affairs in order before following Jesus. This sounds thoughtful, safe, and pragmatic.

"Lord, <u>let me first</u> go and bury my father."

First is a more dangerous thing to say than *no.* It sounds caring and presumes much but it denies the reality that tomorrow is always moving to become yesterday and time is not guaranteed to anyone.

Jesus did not coldly deny a funereal; he mercifully denied a delay.

1) This passage is a proclamation of Jesus' divinity and therefore overrides law and ritual. If a man could forego law and ritual as he committed himself to God as a Nazarite, how much more when God himself was asking a son to commit to following him as the Incarnate Son of Man.
2) Jesus understood that human life is a vapor. Our *"firsts"* cannot out-organize God's' reality. Obedience to getting one's affairs in order can be disobedience to follow.
3) Only the One who could and would conquer death could talk like this about death and the dying. He is not dismissing burials, grief, or the pain of missing a loved one. Rather he is proclaiming that death no longer holds its place of power – HE DOES!

The invitation to follow him is an invitation to life; an invitation to live. His words seem harsh outside the empty tomb, but not from the inside, not when the reality that he who was wrapped in cloth and aloe and myrrh was no longer inside them.

Jesus leaves us all with an invitation to join the living. Are you among them?