

# In to the Deep

## Matthew 8:18-23

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#### Introduction:

#### Attention:

Subject: Many come to Jesus because of his healing power. Most of them seek healing for the sick and the demon-possessed (8:16), but others are drawn to volunteer to follow him in discipleship (8:18–22). At first, the paragraph on the cost of following Jesus seems out of place, until we realize what Matthew is telling us—that we cannot follow Christ just for the benefits. The healer has popularity but nowhere to lay his head (8:20). His claim is absolute.

This pericope is about disciples and discipleship. Well-meaning disciples suggest their willingness to follow Jesus but are shown to be in need of further instruction regarding the full demands of discipleship. Discipleship means not only an initial decision but also the constantly renewed decisions that attachment to Jesus involves (Grundmann). Jesus, having expressed in the Gospel his sovereign lordship in word and now in deed, calls individuals to discipleship in an equally sovereign and absolute manner. Discipleship for Jesus, like the related call to righteousness (cf. the Sermon on the Mount), is an all or nothing matter. Discipleship, as will emerge even more clearly as Matthew proceeds (cf. 10:34–39; 16:24–25; 19:29; 20:26–27), involves self-denial, service, suffering, persecution, and perhaps even death.

Verse: Matthew 8:18-23

#### Body:

**Background:** The Crowd- There is a crowd around Jesus. Why? In verses previous Jesus was healing and casting out spirits 14-17. Matthew is in the midst of chapter about miracles only break it off and talk about discipleship.

#### Body

### i. Follow the Spectacle v.18

#### a. The Crowd

- i. perhaps one of the crowd who had been particularly impressed with the amazing teaching of Jesus
- ii. Apparently beleaguered by the crowd, Jesus decides to escape to the deserted area across the sea

## ii. Follow the Famed Teacher v. 19-20

- a. The Scribe-
  - i. An expert in the Mosaic law
  - ii. Often in opposition to Jesus and associated with other sects in opposition.
  - iii. Accused by Jesus as hypocrites Matthew 23:27-28
    - 1. 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 (ὅπου).
    - 2. A scribe that should have been knowledgeable of Jesus in the Line of David. [Mark 12:35](#)
    - 3. However a scribe would have been unlikely disciple
      - a. There is something in which he had to see that was special.
  - iv. A disciple? Vs.21 mentions the phrase "another disciple" as well as calling Him "Teacher"
    - 1. There are levels of discipleship in the Bible.
      - a. Discipleship, as Jesus will suggest, involves more than just willingness to follow in the sense of accompanying someone, or even willingness to listen to and learn from someone and to live with that person as did students with their rabbis; it involves at bottom a total lifestyle.
      - b. There are situational disciples that follow Jesus temporarily for teachings healing etc.
      - c. So one expects this scribe to illustrate inadequate discipleship, and Matthew includes nothing to discourage this expectation. The man addresses Jesus as "teacher" (*didaskale*), a title given to Christ in Matthew only by those who do not fully believe in him (cf. 12:38; 19:16; 22:16, 24, 36). The title is accurate but not adequate. The scribe professes absolute allegiance, but Jesus realizes that the man doesn't know what such a commitment would actually involve.
      - d. To be sure, in the majority of instances it implies a clearly deficient understanding or estimate of Jesus (e.g., when used by the Pharisees in 9:11; 12:38; 22:16, 24, 36). Furthermore, there is a clear tendency in Matthew to avoid having the disciples address Jesus as "teacher," as he is in certain Markan passages (e.g., Mark 4:38; 9:38; 10:35; 13:1).
- v. Response to Jesus in light of Actions
  - 1. I will follow you "wherever You go"
    - a. Follow meaning I will be a disciple of yours

- b. Jesus Response to Scribe-
  - i. I have no place to sleep
  - ii. have no place to call home
    - 1. Would we do ministry without *comfort*
    - 2. Because Jesus expands the scribe's concept of following by referring to discipleship in terms of a kind of urgent, wandering, and homeless ministry, his answer may well have surprised the scribe. Jesus means that life for him and the disciples who do follow him will be a matter of rigorous and self-denying living.
    - 3. There is undeniably a hyperbolic element here (e.g., during the Galilean ministry Jesus used Capernaum as his "home"), but Jesus' mode of life was anything but a "settled" one.
  - iii. I am the Son of Man
    - 1. Not what you expected no militant leader
    - 2. A humbling term for the Messiah
    - 3. "Son of Man." Jesus' use of the term went against the common messianic concepts of the day, including the Messianic concept of militant Judaism Jesus did not first come to reign victorious or destroy the military might of Rome. Where would Jesus take his followers in the political, military, or religious terms of the world
    - 4. The term "Son of Man" (8:20) was used thirty-two times in Matthew by Jesus to refer to himself. As used by Jesus, the term drew on the implications of its use in Daniel 7:13
    - 5. Three categories of "Son of Man" sayings in the Gospels are generally recognized: those that present him in his earthly role, those that highlight his suffering, and those that point to his glory. Although it is widely disputed, the probable background for the title remains Dan 7:13–14. Thus the term actually focuses on the exaltation and preexistence of Jesus, who was present in God's heavenly throne room and given everlasting authority over all the world. In general "Son of Man" focuses more on Christ's divinity than on his humanity. Still, the title is ambiguous enough to sustain more than one meaning per passage and for Jesus to have invested it with distinctive significance in various contexts. Here the expression may function simply as a circumlocution for "I" or "someone like me." Here too appears a sharp and poignant contrast between Jesus' authority to work the kinds of miracles Matthew has already narrated and his choice to deny himself normal creaturely comforts.

### iii. Follow the Provider vs. 21-22

- a. The Disciple

- i. Disciples
      - 1. “another of his disciples,” is presumably not one of the twelve but one from the larger circle of sincere disciples who had begun to follow Jesus as a part of the nameless crowd
    - ii. As they were fixing to leave one the temporary disciples wanted to go home. To wait for the death of his father
      - 1. Possibly to hear the blessing and inheritance of the father
      - 2. The man perhaps fears that his family will object. At any rate, other priorities come before discipleship.
      - 3. The probability is that this disciple means that, after his father is dead and buried, he will then be free to follow Jesus. “At the present day, an Oriental, with his father sitting by his side, has been known to say respecting his future projects:
        - a. Financial security something to come back too
          - i. Mark 10:17 Rich Young Ruler
          - ii. *Philippians 4:10-14 Learned to be content*
          - iii. 1 Timothy 6:6-8 Contentment
      - 4. To fulfill cultural obligations
  - b. Jesus’ Response
    - i. Allow the spiritual to handle the earthly
      - 1. Let the spiritually dead (or perhaps even the physically dead, if Jesus is employing biting sarcasm here) worry about the affairs of this life and ceremonies for the physically dead
    - ii. Your responsibility is to proclaim the kingdom Luke 9:60
      - 1. My kingdom is a priority over your blessing and cultural obligations.
- iv. Follow the Lord 23-27
  - a. His disciple followed him onto the boat
    - i. True disciples do model appropriate detachment from home and family, which in this case involves physical separation for a time.
    - ii.
  - b. Storm
    - i. Boat covered in waves
    - ii. As commonly happened, a sudden squall arises on the Sea of Galilee. Matthew, however, calls the storm a seismos (literally, earthquake), a term used for apocalyptic upheavals (cf. 24:7; 27:54; 28:2), often with preternatural overtones. This seems to be no ordinary storm but one in which Satan is attacking.
  - c. Jesus Asleep
    - i. Woke Him
    - ii. Save us Lord
      - 1. Despite their acknowledgment of dependence on him and use of the address “Lord” (v. 25, a positive title for Jesus throughout Matthew), Jesus rebukes their “little faith.”

## 2. We are Perishing

- d. Jesus
  - i. Why are you Afraid
  - ii. Men of Little Faith
    - 1. Little faith” simply stresses their lack of faith; it scarcely improves on Mark’s “no faith.” The “rebuke” of the elements employs the same term (*epitimaō*) used elsewhere in exorcism stories (Mark 1:25; 9:25; Luke 4:41). Jesus demonstrates power over the destructive forces of nature, which remain under the devil’s sway. As with his healings, Jesus’ “cure” takes effect immediately.
  - iii. Rebuked the winds and sea
    - 1. Became perfectly calm
    - 2. Astoundingly, Jesus has demonstrated the identical sovereignty over wind and waves attributed to Yahweh in the Old Testament (cf. Jonah 1–2; Pss 104:7; 107:23–32)
- e. Men
  - i. Amazed
  - ii. What kind of man is this
    - 1. Quite understandably, the disciples wonder aloud about the identity of the man, bringing the narrative to its Christological climax. Jesus’ nature miracles in general (and rescue miracles in particular) should lead men and women to worship. The disciples’ fear (Mark 4:41; Luke 8:25), which could imply terror and/or awe, is entirely compatible with their amazement here.
  - iii. Winds and Sea obey Him

**Word Studies:**

Follow- follow someone as a **disciple**, *be a disciple, follow*<sup>1</sup>

Disciple- Cross Reference to Matthew 10:21

**DISCIPLE** Someone who follows another person or another way of life and who submits himself to the discipline (teaching) of that leader or way. In the Bible the term “disciple” is found almost exclusively in the Gospels and the book of Acts, the only exceptions being Isaiah 8:16 and less directly Isaiah 50:4 and 54:13, where the same Hebrew word is translated “learned” and “taught,” respectively. Yet clearly wherever there is a teacher and those taught, the idea of discipleship is present. In the Gospels the immediate followers of Jesus, called by his authority from a wide variety of circumstances, not only the Twelve but all those who were sympathetic to his teaching and committed to him, are called “disciples.” The calling of these disciples took place at a time when other teachers had their disciples, most notably the Pharisees (Mk 2:18; Lk 5:33) and John the Baptist (Mt 9:14). It is evident from the practice of John the Baptist that different leaders called for different disciplines ...

Tyndale Bible Dictionary

**one who is rather constantly associated with someone who has a pedagogical reputation or a particular set of views, *disciple, adherent***<sup>2</sup>

**follower**, often a disciple who is a believer and close follower, though other less committed relationships are indicated (Mt 8:21; 10:1; 12:49; Lk 14:27; Ac 6:1)<sup>3</sup>

Specific to Matthew 8:21-His request demonstrated he felt discipleship was something he could pick up or lay down at will. He put material concerns ahead of Jesus, for he apparently wanted to receive the estate when his father died.<sup>4</sup>

Scribe- Cross Referenced to

**A teacher of the Law** (a scribe)

specialists in the law of Moses: *experts in the law, scholars versed in the law, scribes*;<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.) (36). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>2</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.) (609). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>3</sup> Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament)* (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

<sup>4</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Mt 8:21–22). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>5</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.) (206). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

In the NT the scribes appear alone occasionally and along with other Jewish groups often. In almost all cases they are opponents of Jesus (but see Mark 12:28-34). In Mark the scribes most often appear in association with the high priests and elders (11:27) and the bulk of their appearances are in conjunction with the death of Jesus. Similarly, in the early chapters of Acts the scribes and elders are opponents of Christianity (4:5; 6:12). In Matthew and Luke the scribes are also paired with the Pharisees in questioning Jesus. Thus the scribes are seen both as part of the leadership and also as a learned class. Two passages (Mark 2:16; Acts 23:9) speak of scribes of the Pharisees, indicating that scribes could belong to other groups within Judaism.<sup>6</sup>

a recognized expert in Jewish law (including both canonical and traditional laws and regulations)—‘one who is learned in the Law, expert in the Law’ or ‘... Law of Moses.’ πῶς λέγουσιν οἱ γραμματεῖς ὅτι ὁ Χριστὸς υἱὸς Δαυίδ ἐστίν; ‘how can the experts of the Law say that the Messiah will be the descendant of David?’ Mk 12:35.<sup>7</sup>

**A scribe** (εἰς γραμματεὺς [*heis grammateus*]). One (εἰς [*heis*])=“a,” indefinite article. Already a disciple as shown by “another of the disciples” (ἕτερος των μαθητων [*heteros tōn mathētōn*]) in 8:21. He calls Jesus “Teacher” (διδασκαλε [*didaskale*]), but he seems to be a “bumptious” brother full of self-confidence and self-complacency. “Even one of that most unimpressible class, in spirit and tendency utterly opposed to the ways of Jesus” (Bruce). Yet Jesus deals gently with him<sup>8</sup>

Teacher- Used in addressing Jesus (corresp. to the title רַבּ, רַבִּי rabbi) Mt 8:19;<sup>9</sup>

**The Son of man** (θεο υἱος του ἀνθρώπου [*tho huios tou anthrōpou*]). This remarkable expression, applied to himself by Jesus so often, appears here for the first time. There is a considerable modern literature devoted to it. “It means much for the Speaker, who has chosen it deliberately, in connection with private reflections, at whose nature we can only guess, by study of the many occasions on which the name is used” (Bruce). Often it means the Representative Man. It may sometimes stand for the Aramaic *barnasha*, the man, but in most instances that idea will not suit. Jesus uses it as a concealed Messianic title. It is possible that this scribe would not understand the phrase at all. Bruce thinks that here Jesus means “the unprivileged Man,” worse off than the foxes and the birds. Jesus spoke Greek as well as Aramaic. It is inconceivable that the Gospels should never call Jesus “the Son of man” and always credit it to him as his own words if he did not so term himself, about eighty times in all, thirty-three in Matthew. Jesus in his early ministry,

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<sup>6</sup> Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row, P., & Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). *Harper's Bible dictionary* (1st ed.) (914). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

<sup>7</sup> Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.). New York: United Bible societies.

<sup>8</sup> Robertson, A. (1997). *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Mt 8:19). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

<sup>9</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.) (241). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

except at the very start in John 4, abstains from calling himself Messiah. This term suited his purpose exactly to get the people used to his special claim as Messiah when he is ready to make it openly.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Robertson, A. (1997). *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Mt 8:20). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.



## Commentary Notes:

Many come to Jesus because of his healing power. Most of them seek healing for the sick and the demon-possessed (8:16), but others are drawn to volunteer to follow him in discipleship (8:18–22). At first, the paragraph on the cost of following Jesus seems out of place, until we realize what Matthew is telling us—that we cannot follow Christ just for the benefits. The healer has popularity but nowhere to lay his head (8:20). His claim is absolute.<sup>11</sup>

**And bury my father** (και θαψαι τον πατερα μου [*kai thapsai ton patera mou*]). The first man was an enthusiast. This one is overcautious. It is by no means certain that the father was dead. Tobit urged his son Tobias to be sure to bury him: “Son, when I am dead, bury me” (Tobit 4:3). The probability is that this disciple means that, after his father is dead and buried, he will then be free to follow Jesus. “At the present day, an Oriental, with his father sitting by his side, has been known to say respecting his future projects: ‘But I must first bury my father!’ ” (Plummer). Jesus wanted first things first. But even if his father was not actually dead, service to Christ comes first.<sup>12</sup>

**A teacher of the Law** (a scribe) **came to** Jesus and, seemingly without thinking, blurted out, **Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.** Though Jesus desired disciples who would follow Him and work in His harvest fields, He wanted only those who were properly motivated. Jesus’ reply to this scribe demonstrated His lowly character for He, in contrast with animals such as **foxes** and **birds**, did not even have a **place** where He could **lay His head** at night. He had no permanent home. The Lord obviously knew the heart of this person and saw that he desired fame in following a prominent Teacher. Such was not Jesus’ character. This is the first of numerous times Jesus referred to Himself or was called by others **the Son of Man** (29 times in Matt., 14 in Mark, 24 in Luke, 13 in John). It points to Jesus as the Messiah (cf. Dan. 7:13-14).<sup>13</sup>

Christ’s communication with two, who, upon his remove to *the other side*, were loth to stay behind, and had a mind to follow him, not as others, who were his followers at large, but to come into close discipleship, which the most were shy of; for it carried such a face of strictness as they could not like, nor be well reconciled to; but here is an account of two who seemed desirous to come into communion, and yet were not right; which is here given as a specimen of the hindrances by which many are kept from closing with Christ,

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<sup>11</sup> Campbell, I. D. (2008). *Opening up Matthew* (56). Leominster: Day One Publications.

<sup>12</sup> Robertson, A. (1997). *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Mt 8:21). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

<sup>13</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Mt 8:18–20). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

and cleaving to him; and a warning to us, to set out in following Christ, so as that we may not come short; to lay such a foundation, as that our building may stand.<sup>14</sup>

#### *8:18–22 The Focus and Priority of Discipleship*

This is a departure saying and includes the first occurrence in Matthew of the phrase, “Son of Man.” Jesus’ use of the term went against the common messianic concepts of the day, including the Messianic concept of militant Judaism. Jesus did not first come to reign victorious or destroy the military might of Rome. Where would Jesus take his followers in the political, military, or religious terms of the world (8:20)? Nowhere. Jesus cautioned the disciples to evaluate their reason for following him. He wanted to make sure that they knew that glory and conquest would only come after they had suffered humiliation in the eyes of the world.

The term “Son of Man” (8:20) was used thirty-two times in Matthew by Jesus to refer to himself. As used by Jesus, the term drew on the implications of its use in Daniel 7:13 (for more on the “Son of Man,” see the guiding concepts for the Gospel of Mark). In Matthew 8:22 Jesus was saying, “let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead.” There was no greater priority than following the Author of life.<sup>15</sup>

**20. And Jesus saith unto him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head—**Few as there were of the scribes who attached themselves to Jesus, it would appear, from his calling Him Teacher, that this one was a “disciple” in that looser sense of the word in which it is applied to the crowds who flocked after Him, with more or less conviction that His claims were well founded. But from the answer which he received we are led to infer that there was more of transient emotion—of temporary impulse—than of intelligent principle in the speech. The preaching of Christ had riveted and charmed him; his heart had swelled; his enthusiasm had been kindled; and in this state of mind he will go anywhere with Him, and feels impelled to tell Him so. “Wilt thou?” replies the Lord Jesus. “Knowest thou whom thou art pledging thyself to follow, and whither haply He may lead thee? No warm home, no downy pillow has He for thee: He has them not for Himself. The foxes are not without their holes, nor do the birds of the air lack their nests; but the Son of man has to depend on the hospitality of others, and borrow the pillow whereon He lays His head.” How affecting is this reply! And yet He rejects not this man’s offer, nor refuses him the liberty to follow Him. Only He will have him know what he is doing, and “count the cost.” He will have him weigh well the real nature and the strength of his attachment, whether it be such as will abide in the day of trial. If so, he will be right welcome, for Christ puts none away. But it seems too plain that in this case that had not been done. And so we have called this the Rash or Precipitate Disciple.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Henry, M. (1996). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 8:18–22). Peabody: Hendrickson.

<sup>15</sup> Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary*. The Tyndale reference library (404–405). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>16</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Mt 8:20). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

**18** This transitional verse (following Mark 4:35; cf. Luke 8:22) looks very much as though it ought to introduce vv 23–27. Instead, because of the command to the disciples (not yet the twelve but a more nebulous grouping) ἀπελθεῖν εἰς τὸ πέραν, “to go to the other side,” it becomes the occasion for Matthew to include two discipleship sayings. Apparently beleaguered by the crowd, Jesus decides to escape to the deserted area across the sea. In Jesus’ command Matthew senses a hint of the radical call and demands of discipleship. Was it merely the labor of the boat journey, or perhaps the ominous clouds that may have threatened against such a voyage just then, or just the assumed readiness to be away from the comforts of home for probably at least several nights? In the word “commanded” (cf. 8:9) and in the verb ἀπερχεσθαι, “to go” (the one common element in vv 18, 19–20, and 21–22), Matthew not only reminds the readers of the authority of Jesus but turns them to the rigors of discipleship, inserting the following material.

**19** Again we encounter Matthew’s favorite προσέρχεσθαι (see on 5:1). εἷς is used here as an indefinite article, “a” γραμματεὺς, “scribe.” Either Matthew has access to a tradition that informs him that the man was a scribe, or he speculates that the man was a scribe, perhaps one of the crowd who had been particularly impressed with the amazing teaching of Jesus. He is not yet a disciple (correctly, Kingsbury, *NTS* 34 [1988] 47–48) but believes he would like to become one. Matthew’s Jewish-Christian community doubtless included some of its own scribes (cf. Christian scribes in 13:52 and 23:34), rivaling the scribes of the synagogue (see D. Orton, *Understanding Scribe*, 137–63). A scribe was a professional Torah scholar and would have had a very special interest in what Jesus taught. Hence, this scribe addresses Jesus as διδάσκαλος, “teacher.” This address is not necessarily to be

taken as negative, even by implication or comparison, for example, with κύριος, “Lord” (as, for example, in v 21). To be sure, in the majority of instances it implies a clearly deficient understanding or estimate of Jesus (e.g., when used by the Pharisees in 9:11; 12:38; 22:16, 24, 36). Furthermore, there is a clear tendency in Matthew to avoid having the disciples address Jesus as “teacher,” as he is in certain Markan passages (e.g., Mark 4:38; 9:38; 10:35; 13:1). But on occasion the address can be positive, as when used by the potential disciple in 19:16 or, more importantly, by Jesus himself, as in 23:8; 26:18; or especially 10:24–25, where “teacher” is paired in rabbinic fashion with “disciple” (μαθητής). 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 (ὅπου). As Schulz remarks (Q, 106), the man wanted to take his permanent place as a *Talmid* (rabbinical student) of Jesus. “Follow” (ἀκολουθεῖν) and “go” (ἀπέρχεσθαι) are, as we have noted, key words in the vocabulary of discipleship. Here the word ἀκολουθήσω, “I want to follow,” meaning “following” literally, becomes infused with the notion of discipleship in the broadest sense. Discipleship, as Jesus will suggest, involves more than just willingness to follow in the sense of accompanying someone, or even willingness to listen to and learn from someone and to live with that person as did students with their rabbis; it involves at bottom a total lifestyle. It is important to note (with Kingsbury, *NTS* 34 [1988] 45–59) that although the scribe reflects good Jewish practice in choosing his teacher, in the Gospel narrative it is consistently Jesus who initiates the disciple-master relationship by his sovereign choice of disciples. This perhaps explains the coolness of Jesus’ response in the next verse.

**20** Because Jesus expands the scribe’s concept of following by referring to discipleship in terms of a kind of urgent, wandering, and homeless ministry, his answer may well have surprised the scribe. Jesus means that life for him and the disciples who do follow him will be a matter of rigorous and self-denying living. As he was accustomed to doing, Jesus used the ordinary things of nature (cf. 6:26, 28) to make his point. Even what the foxes and the birds have is denied Jesus and so also the disciples who would follow him (note 10:24: “a disciple is not above his master”; cf. the homelessness of the apostles, 1 Cor 4:11). The response of Jesus is anything but flat prose. It is beautiful, vivid, and memorable. The foxes and the birds (cf. Ps 84:3), simple creatures of God, have their homes, but the Son of Man has not so much as a place to lay his head. There is undeniably a hyperbolic element here (e.g., during the Galilean ministry Jesus used Capernaum as his “home”), but Jesus’ mode of life was anything but a “settled” one. Also possibly in view is the opposition and persecution experienced by him (cf. Kingsbury, *NTS* 34 [1988] 45–59; Schweizer, *Lordship*, 78). The attempt to find symbolism in the foxes and birds (cf. T. W. Manson, *Sayings*, 72) seems unjustified and unnecessary. Perhaps the words were part of a familiar proverb (for a parallel use of the metaphor, E. Nestle points to Plutarch’s *Life of Tiberius Graechus*, chap. 9). υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, “Son of Man” (cf. above “Excursus: Son

of Man”), here stands in the place of “I.” But although it is not a titular instance of “Son of Man” (*pace* Davies-Allison; Luz), that aspect can hardly be altogether absent from the readers’ minds. The Son of Man, elsewhere in the Gospel to be described in such exalted language (and mysterious language, too, for the predictions of suffering and death), lives here in fulfillment of this phase of his ministry in abject humility.

**21–22** ἕτερος δὲ τῶν μαθητῶν [αὐτοῦ], “another of his disciples,” is presumably not one of the twelve but one from the larger circle of sincere disciples who had begun to follow Jesus as a part of the nameless crowd (see Wilkins). ἕτερος, “another,” could imply that the scribe of v 19 is also to be considered one of the larger circle of disciples—a possible, but not a necessary, conclusion. Perhaps both are to be regarded as beginning or apprentice disciples who are now being initiated into the radical demands their discipleship will entail if they are true to it (Kingsbury, *NTS* 34 [1988] 45–59, regards the former as a would-be disciple, the latter as a “true disciple”). (The pure speculation of Albright-Mann that δέ should be οὐδέ, “not”; one of the disciples, is hardly necessary.) This disciple does not make a statement as in the previous instance. Instead he makes a request that seems particularly reasonable, namely, that before he follows Jesus, he be allowed to ἀπελθεῖν (the same verb used in the call to discipleship, now used in the call away from discipleship) καὶ θάψαι τὸν πατέρα μου, “go and bury my father.”

Indeed, this was required of a son by the Torah implicitly in the commandment to honor one’s father and mother and hence explicitly in later Jewish tradition (cf. Gen 50:5; Tob 4:3; cf. Sir 38:16; *m Ber.* 3:1, where burial of the dead supersedes other religious duties; in Lev 21:2 priests are allowed the defilement of touching the dead in the case of close family members); indeed, not to do so would violate the command of God. Yet Jesus in his response denies the legitimacy of such a delay. It is tempting for this reason to understand θάψαι τὸν πατέρα μου, “to bury my father,” in the sense of “look after him until he dies” (for evidence that the phrase could have been understood in this sense, see K. E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980] 26–27), but this too is required by the Torah. In fact, so important is the commitment to honor one’s parents that to fail in any of the following responsibilities is to be untrue to the Torah: to bury a father who has just died, to participate in the six days of official mourning after such a death, to look after one who is sick and perhaps near death, and to provide for an aging parent who may yet live many years. From the standpoint of the call to discipleship, the longer the delay involved the more reasonable Jesus’ negative reaction becomes (cf. 15:4). But the call to discipleship is for Jesus an absolute one that need not satisfy any normal canons of responsibility (Luz rightly uses such words as *respektlosradikal*; *skandalös*): “Follow [for the importance of ἀκολουθεῖν in Matthew, see *Comment* on 4:20] me, and let the dead bury the dead.” Jesus’ call in this case supersedes even strict obedience to the commandment of the Torah. For a similar exception pertaining to high priests and Nazirites, see Lev 21:11, Num 6:6–7 (for an analysis of its radical character, see E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985] 252–55). Jesus’ response to the disciple is “typical of the shock-tactics with which Jesus’ radical demand

is presented" (France, 161). Hengel finds hardly any logion "which more sharply runs counter to law, piety and custom" (14). Nothing can come before (cf. *πρῶτον*, "first") discipleship to Jesus in the cause of the kingdom. The same type of radical call demanding immediate response is found in Luke's added response to a disciple who wanted merely to say farewell to his family, where there is little uncertainty about the brevity of time involved (Luke 9:61–62). In a passage with some interesting ties to these discipleship sayings of Jesus as well as a remarkable contrast, Elisha was in fact allowed to return home just in order to take proper leave of his parents before assuming his new role as the follower of Elijah (1 Kgs 19:19–21). The concluding words of Jesus as they stand in the Greek text, *ἄφες τοὺς νεκροὺς θάψαι τοὺς ἑαυτῶν νεκρούς*, mean "let the dead bury their own dead" and are perhaps to be understood as "let the spiritually dead bury their own physically dead." The notion of being "spiritually dead" was not unknown to the Jews (cf. Str-B 1:489; 3:165). On the other hand, it may well be that the Greek has misunderstood this underlying Aramaic, reading *lēmīqbar*, "to bury," for *limqabber*, "to the burier, to the undertaker" (see Perles; Montefiore, *Synoptic Gospels* 2:134), which may have run "let the grave-diggers bury the dead." (Cf. M. Black's suggestion [*Aramaic Approach*, 207–8] that *mîṭîn*, "dead," has been mistakenly read for *mēṭînîn*, "waverers" ["Let the waverers bury the dead"].) T. W. Manson may be closest to the truth, however, when he speculates that the statement means something like "that business can take care of itself" (*Sayings*, 73). The reading of the text as it now stands and the interpretation of the first νεκρούς as the spiritually dead would have been aided by the later theology of the Church (cf. for example, Rom 6:3; Eph 2:1). Be that as it may, the clarity of the point remains that the disciple is not to let himself or herself be distracted by anything, however legitimate in itself.

### **Explanation**

This pericope is about disciples and discipleship. Well-meaning disciples suggest their willingness to follow Jesus but are shown to be in need of further instruction regarding the full demands of discipleship. Discipleship means not only an initial decision but also the constantly renewed decisions that attachment to Jesus involves (Grundmann). Jesus, having expressed in the Gospel his sovereign lordship in word and now in deed, calls individuals to discipleship in an equally sovereign and absolute manner. Discipleship for Jesus, like the related call to righteousness (cf. the Sermon on the Mount), is an all or nothing matter. Discipleship, as will emerge even more clearly as Matthew proceeds (cf. 10:34–39; 16:24–25; 19:29; 20:26–27), involves self-denial, service, suffering, persecution, and perhaps even death. There is furthermore in several of these passages mention of the possible impact of discipleship upon family relationships. Disciples are therefore in a sense always learners who are discovering more about discipleship as they attempt to live in obedience to Jesus. But the key point is that the call is radical; so too must the responding commitment be radical. It would be as much a mistake to take the statement of v 22 quite literally (unless in fact the proposed delay was to be a long one) as it would be to dismember oneself for the sake of righteousness (thus Carson rightly).

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Str-B H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, 4 vols. (Munich: Beck'sche, 1926–28)

But, despite the hyperbole, there is a fundamental principle here about the radical character, urgency, and uncompromising nature of discipleship that is to be heard with every invitation to, or volunteering of, discipleship to Jesus and the cause of the kingdom.<sup>17</sup>

*(1) The Demands of Discipleship: Inadequate Responses (8:18–22)*

The scene and theme shift. As will happen repeatedly, Jesus tries to escape the crowds (cf. 12:15; 14:13; 15:21). Later he will flee hostility; here he is probably just seeking physical rest (cf. his deep sleep through the subsequent storm, v. 24) and spiritual refreshment (cf. Luke 6:12—following a previous frenzy of healings).

*(a) A Scribe's Overeagerness (8:18–20)*

**18** When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. **19** Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”

**20** Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

**8:18–20** Jesus commands an unspecified group of individuals, most likely the Twelve, to get boats ready to cross to the east side of the Sea of Galilee. Before he can leave, two other people express their desire to follow Jesus across the lake. The first man stands out because he is called a scribe (“teacher of the law”). So far in Matthew scribes, like Pharisees, have been objects only of denunciation. So one expects this scribe to illustrate inadequate discipleship, and Matthew includes nothing to discourage this expectation.<sup>26</sup> The man addresses Jesus as “teacher” (*didaskale*), a title given to Christ in Matthew only

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<sup>17</sup> Donald A. Hagner, [Matthew 1–13](#), vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1993), 215–218.

<sup>26</sup> Contra J. Kiilunen, “Der nachfolgewillige Schriftgelehrte: Matthäus 8.19–20 im Verständnis des Evangelisten,” *NTS* 37 (1991): 268–79.



by those who do not fully believe in him (cf. 12:38; 19:16; 22:16, 24, 36). The title is accurate but not adequate. The scribe professes absolute allegiance, but Jesus realizes that the man doesn't know what such a commitment would actually involve. He describes his itinerant ministry as even more austere than the lives of birds and foxes. Of course, Jesus had a home in Capernaum even if it was a borrowed one, but he was often not there to use it. At a deeper level Jesus' disciples must recognize that no location on earth affords a true home. Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20), and life on earth is lived as "strangers [sojourners, exiles] in the world" (1 Pet 1:1).

Verse 20 contains the first reference in Matthew to Jesus as "Son of Man." There is a vast literature on the origin, meaning, and authenticity of this title.<sup>27</sup> Three categories of "Son of Man" sayings in the Gospels are generally recognized: those that present him in his earthly role, those that highlight his suffering, and those that point to his glory. Although it is widely disputed, the probable background for the title remains Dan 7:13–14. Thus the term actually focuses on the exaltation and preexistence of Jesus, who was present in God's heavenly throne room and given everlasting authority over all the world. In general "Son of Man" focuses more on Christ's divinity than on his humanity.<sup>28</sup> Still, the title is ambiguous enough to sustain more than one meaning per passage and for Jesus to have invested it with distinctive significance in various contexts.<sup>29</sup> Here the expression may function simply as a circumlocution for "I" or "someone like me." Here too appears a sharp and poignant contrast between Jesus' authority to work the kinds of miracles Matthew has already narrated and his choice to deny himself normal creaturely comforts. As a result, Jesus cannot promise those who wish to "go on the road" with him as many material provisions as they might prefer.<sup>30</sup> Potential disciples often long for the glory associated with following Jesus and forget the deprivation that may often precede it.<sup>31</sup>

*(b) A Would-Be Disciple's Undereagerness (8:21–22)*

<sup>21</sup> Another disciple said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

<sup>22</sup> But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

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<sup>27</sup> For the best recent representatives of important diverse viewpoints, see M. Casey, *Son of Man: The Interpretation and Influence of Daniel 7* (London: SPCK, 1979); B. Lindars, *Jesus Son of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); and C. Caragounis, *The Son of Man* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986).

<sup>28</sup> See esp. S. Kim, *The Son of Man as the Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); W. Horbury, "The Messianic Associations of 'The Son of Man'," *JTS* 36 (1985): 34–55.

<sup>29</sup> See esp. F. F. Bruce, "The Background to the Son of Man Sayings," in *Christ the Lord*, ed. H. H. Rowdon (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1982), 50–70.

<sup>30</sup> See esp. M. Casey, "The Jackals and the Son of Man (Matt. 8.20 // Luke 9.58)," *JSNT* 23 (1985): 3–22.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. R. H. Mounce (*Matthew*, GNC [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985], 75): "Miracles create enthusiasts who need to learn the difficulties connected with discipleship before they start on the journey."



**8:21** Matthew describes the second would-be follower as “another disciple.” This seems to imply that the scribe had also been some kind of disciple, yet at this stage in Matthew’s narrative, before the Twelve have formally been presented (10:1–4), the term “disciple” must be taken more loosely as anyone who follows along with Jesus and shows some kind of interest in him. Matthew again wishes to illustrate the inadequacy of this man’s response. His attitude does not demonstrate sufficient commitment. If the first man was overeager, this one is undereager. Jesus had to remind the scribe that sacrifices would be necessary. He must warn this “disciple” that distractions cannot be countenanced. The man is not ready to follow quite yet. “Bury my father” implies at the very least that the man wishes to postpone discipleship until after a funeral and the mandatory months of mourning that followed. Quite possibly he is saying much more: the expression may well have been an idiom for *let me wait until my father is dead*.<sup>32</sup> The man perhaps fears that his family will object. At any rate, other priorities come before discipleship.

**8:22** Jesus can brook no such excuses but requires an immediate response. A future opportunity may not come. Let the spiritually dead (or perhaps even the physically dead, if Jesus is employing biting sarcasm here) worry about the affairs of this life and ceremonies for the physically dead. Ironically, the expense of most Christian funerals continues to burden those who grieve their loved ones while lavishing care upon corpses oblivious to such affection. Even more ironically, many who are alive postpone their response to the direct call of Jesus because of more pressing human allegiances.<sup>33</sup> D. A. Carson insightfully observes, “Little has done more to harm the witness of the Christian church than the practice of filling its ranks with every volunteer who is willing to make a little profession, talk fluently of experience, but display little of perseverance.”<sup>34</sup>

Taken together, Jesus’ responses to these two men could hardly reflect a sharper break from Judaism or a more stringent call to count the cost of discipleship (cf. Luke 14:28–32).<sup>35</sup> Some have imagined that one or both of these would-be disciples became genuine followers of Christ,<sup>36</sup> but Matthew does not describe their actions to Jesus’ rebukes. And without specifying any positive response, he seems to imply that they

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<sup>32</sup> See esp. K. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes: More Lucan Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 26–27. B. R. McCane (“‘Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead’: Secondary Burial and Matt 8:21–22,” *HTR* 83 [1990]: 31–43) thinks that the practice of reburying the bones of a deceased person in an ossuary is in view here, so that the man may be asking for up to nearly a year’s reprieve before he can follow Jesus.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Bailey, *Peasant Eyes*, 31–32: “Loyalty to Jesus and the kingdom he inaugurates is more important than loyalty to the cultural norms of your society or parental authority.”

<sup>34</sup> Carson, *When Jesus Confronts*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> For a full-length treatment of the theme of Jesus’ itinerant ministry, taking its starting point from these verses, see M. Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

<sup>36</sup> See esp. J. D. Kingsbury, “On Following Jesus: The ‘Eager’ Scribe and the ‘Reluctant’ Disciple (Matthew 8.18–22),” *NTS* 34 (1988): 45–59.

refused Jesus' terms. At any rate, what Matthew does include uniformly warns against inadequate response to Jesus' call.<sup>37</sup>

## *(2) Divine Authority over Satan's Realm (8:23–9:8)*

The three miracles in 8:23–9:8 illustrate Jesus' power over disaster, demons, and disease. The storm stilling contains a rebuke of the elements that resembles an exorcism (8:26). The exorcism of the two Gadarenes clearly vanquishes Satan's minions. And the paralytic's malady is linked to his sin—further enslavement to the devil's realm.

### *(a) Stilling the Storm: Response to Disaster (8:23–27)*

**<sup>23</sup>Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. <sup>24</sup>Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. <sup>25</sup>The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"**

**<sup>26</sup>He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.**

**<sup>27</sup>The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"**

**8:23–25** Verse 23 resumes the story line of v. 18. The words "disciples" and "followed" link back with v. 21 and vv. 19 and 22, respectively. The two dialogues with the would-be disciples and the stilling of the storm narrative belong together. True disciples do model appropriate detachment from home and family, which in this case involves physical separation for a time. As commonly happened, a sudden squall arises on the Sea of Galilee. Matthew, however, calls the storm a *seismos* (literally, earthquake), a term used for apocalyptic upheavals (cf. 24:7; 27:54; 28:2), often with preternatural overtones. This seems to be no ordinary storm but one in which Satan is attacking. The boat is in danger of being swamped, and lives are at risk. Amazingly, Jesus remains so calm that he continues to sleep. The disciples rouse him and beg for help. "Save" and perish ("drown") refer first of all to the disciples' physical lives, but by Matthew's time they have become the standard terms for spiritual salvation and destruction. Matthew may well intend a double entendre here.<sup>38</sup>

**8:26** Despite their acknowledgment of dependence on him and use of the address "Lord" (v. 25, a positive title for Jesus throughout Matthew), Jesus rebukes their "little faith." Matthew places Jesus' rebuke before the miracle, while Mark reverses the sequence (Mark 4:40). Yet even though Matthew's narrative reads more naturally, it is

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Luke 9:61–62 for additional details that support this interpretation. Note also that Luke again has three examples from which Matthew has apparently excerpted two.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. F. W. Beare (*The Gospel according to Matthew* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981], 215), who notes that "Lord, save" may have been a liturgical form in Matthew's church like the later "Lord, have mercy" (*Kyrie eleison*).

hard to believe that he is trying to present the disciples in a more positive light.<sup>39</sup> “Little faith” simply stresses their lack of faith; it scarcely improves on Mark’s “no faith.”<sup>40</sup> The “rebuke” of the elements employs the same term (*epitimaō*) used elsewhere in exorcism stories (Mark 1:25; 9:25; Luke 4:41). Jesus demonstrates power over the destructive forces of nature, which remain under the devil’s sway. As with his healings, Jesus’ “cure” takes effect immediately.

**8:27** Astoundingly, Jesus has demonstrated the identical sovereignty over wind and waves attributed to Yahweh in the Old Testament (cf. Jonah 1–2; Pss 104:7; 107:23–32).<sup>41</sup> Such power can do far more than just heal sickness. Miracles over “nature” remain much rarer in Jewish and Christian history. Quite understandably, the disciples wonder aloud about the identity of the man, bringing the narrative to its Christological climax. Jesus’ nature miracles in general (and rescue miracles in particular)<sup>42</sup> should lead men and women to worship.<sup>43</sup> The disciples’ fear (Mark 4:41; Luke 8:25), which could imply terror and/or awe, is entirely compatible with their amazement here.

Contemporary applications of this miracle almost universally “demythologize” the narrative (deriving a naturalistic lesson from a supernatural event), so that it becomes a lesson about Jesus “stilling the storms” of our lives. Matthew did not likely have such an application in mind. There are implications for discipleship here, to be sure; we must turn to Jesus as the one to trust in all circumstances of life. But the focus of this passage remains squarely Christological—on who Christ is, not on what he will do for us.<sup>44</sup> One who has this kind of power can be no less than God himself, worthy of worship, irrespective of when and how he chooses to use that power in our lives. Sometimes he leaves storms unstilled for good and godly ends (cf. 2 Cor 12:7–8).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> As often held since the seminal study of G. Bornkamm, “The Stilling of the Storm in Matthew,” in Bornkamm, Barth, and Held, *Tradition and Interpretation*, 52–57.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. further Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 115–16.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. P. J. Achtemeier, “Person and Deed: Jesus and the Storm-Tossed Sea,” *Int* 16 (1962): 169–76.

<sup>42</sup> For a form-critical classification of Jesus’ miracles, see esp. G. Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

<sup>43</sup> See esp. C. L. Blomberg, “The Miracles as Parables,” in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 6, ed. D. Wenham and C. Blomberg (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 340–42.

<sup>44</sup> See esp. P. F. Feiler, “The Stilling of the Storm in Matthew: A Response to Günther Bornkamm,” *JETS* 26 (1983): 399–406.

<sup>18</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 146–150.

