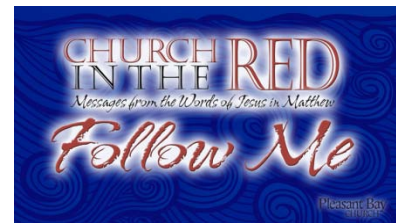


Sermon Follow Me

Dan Neary

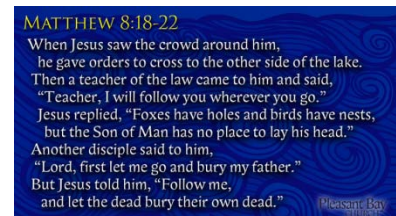
Knowing that we had a lot going on this morning, with Communion and our special missionary guest (Mark Rodli), I have prepared a short sermon for this stop in our series.



Some say that it is the short speeches that are the hardest to prepare. It is often quoted that Winston Churchill, one of history's most famous orators, would say that he could deliver a two-hour speech on a moment's notice, but a five-minute speech could take a full week to prepare.

It could be that if we wanted to boil down these *red letters* we've been studying to just a few words... that we needed a very short sermon to remember... these two words could be what we would choose: **follow me**. These two *red lettered* words must be among the most important; they certainly convey one of the most important messages Jesus ever uttered to those original hearers of His words... and they are among the most important words we hear today from our Savior. Jesus says to all of us, and each one of us, "Follow me."

These few verses are the type that, if we don't think carefully about what is going on here, we might miss the full meaning.



It could seem that Jesus is speaking in riddles here. "Foxes have holes and birds have nests..." "Let the dead bury their own dead..."

This could seem like an odd way to respond to folk who want to follow Him.

Let's take a few minutes to walk more deliberately through these verses to see if we might get a fuller picture of what was going on.

¹⁸When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake.¹

This is a consistent pattern with Jesus. He preaches, and teaches, and meets needs of the people... and crowds form. Then He retreats from the crowd with the assurance that another crowd will soon gather. There are those who seek leadership who go where the crowds are to say what they want to say and do their thing... but Jesus was the kind of leader who made a crowd.

But just after giving the orders to move on, but before actually making the move...

¹The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 8:18.

¹⁹Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”²

Let’s wonder what was going on here. The text doesn’t explicitly tell us what was motivating this scribe’s remarkable declaration. What would cause this teacher to acknowledge Jesus as Teacher and pledge his allegiance in this way?

We should, of course, consider the context. We have a lot of teachers in our congregation, an unusually high concentration really (professors, public schools, instructors, etc). One thing we know about teachers is that they are really just accomplished and life-long students. Any teacher that is worthy of honor and respect is really just the chief student in a classroom.

Most of that life-long learning is generally informal and self-directed... but there are usually seasons in a teacher’s life in which the learning becomes formal and structured. In our contemporary system, one would likely prepare to teach in a baccalaureate degree program, and then take the next step with a master’s degree program, and then maybe even go on to a doctoral degree program.

This could very well be what is going on in our text. While **we** would simply select a University, apply, pay the fees, and enroll in pursuit of our advanced degrees, there was no such system in the days of Jesus. Students would seek out teachers and become their disciples.

Just as we might associate different levels of prestige with different Universities (I’m happy with my degrees from NC and UST, but it could be more impressive if my MBA was from Harvard or Stanford or the Kellogg School at Northwestern)... students in Jesus day would seek after the big names so that they could one day say that they studied with the best.

After seeing Jesus meet needs by performing miracles, and after hearing Jesus teach with such authority, this teacher appeared to be choosing well by seeking his master’s degree under the Master, Jesus.

The context helps us understand what could have been behind this request... and the reply Jesus gives teaches us even more.

²⁰Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”³

It appears that Jesus interpreted this request as a quest for promotion and prosperity.

There are all sorts of reasons to earn degrees in higher education... but possibly chief among them is a quest for a **better life**. We expect these degrees to qualify us for better jobs, and higher pay, and a better life.

²*The Holy Bible: Today’s New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 8:19.

³*The Holy Bible: Today’s New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 8:20.

Jesus causes this teacher to reconsider his plan. Jesus says, “Look, I don’t even have a place to call my own. No nest like a bird, or den like a fox... I stay where I can. If you want to follow me so that I can usher you to the good life, I’m probably not your guy.”

Jesus didn’t promise the good life; *red letters* in our future (eight chapters in our future to be exact) will make it clear.

²⁴Then Jesus said to his disciples, “**Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.**” ²⁵For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.⁴

Following Jesus is not first and foremost a matter of prosperity, promotion, or even provision.

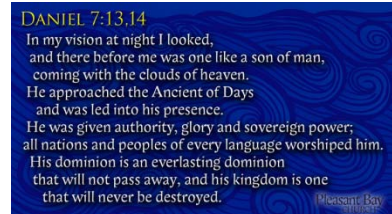
It is worth noting that Jesus refers to Himself as “Son of Man” in this passage, the first time we see this phrase in Matthew’s Gospel. It is a bit of a *double entendre*, a phrase that has a plain meaning and also a more nuanced meaning. The plain meaning is important as Jesus describes Himself as human, not the son of *a* man of course, but a human son of humanity. He identifies with our humanity, our commonness, and it fits with the context here with Jesus speaking about His own poverty and commonness in the natural.

But those with any understanding of the Scriptures would have heard another meaning in that phrase. It comes from the prophet Daniel, the passage that Teresa read for us earlier.

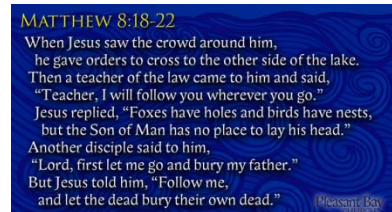
I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.⁵

When Jesus identified Himself as “Son of Man” He was identifying Himself as Messiah.

Another came to Jesus with a plan. This second one is described as a disciple, one who had already been following Jesus.



DANIEL 7:13,14
In my vision at night I looked,
and there before me was one like a son of man,
coming with the clouds of heaven.
He approached the Ancient of Days
and was led into his presence.
He was given authority, glory and sovereign power;
all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one
that will never be destroyed.



MATTHEW 8:18-22
When Jesus saw the crowd around him,
he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake.
Then a teacher of the law came to him and said,
“Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”
Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds have nests,
but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”
Another disciple said to him,
“Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”
But Jesus told him, “Follow me,
and let the dead bury their own dead.”

⁴The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 16:24-25.

⁵The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Da 7:13-14.

²¹Another disciple said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”⁶

If we read this as the disciple requesting a *three-day pass* to attend his father’s funeral, we would probably be wrong.

It was more likely, given the cultural and social context of the day, that the request would have been more along the lines of, “Jesus, my father is aging and I am running his affairs. Allow me to return to my family and our business. Once my father has passed away and I have attended to these matters, I will have my inheritance and that will be a great time for me to join with You again and be your disciple.”

²²But Jesus told him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”⁷

Jesus knew that the time was short, and this was the moment to be among His disciples. This was the moment to be preaching the Good News of the Kingdom of God. This was the moment to be bringing spiritual life to those who were so spiritually dead. Jesus, with these few words, was inviting this one to stay on the side of spiritual life, rather than returning to the life of the spiritually dead.

The time was now and the priority was clear. The “maybe later, not now, allow me to attend to my career and family matters” approach did not fit the opportunity to be a follower of Jesus. This was a matter of priorities... and Jesus was explaining that this disciple appeared to have his priorities all wrong.

I promised a short sermon, so let’s get to asking the question: so what?

What practical, relevant thing can we take away from this text today? How can we apply this to our lives?



Taking the risk of oversimplifying this, I see in this short text two of the most common misconceptions we might have about following Jesus: prosperity and tradition.

First ***prosperity***.

It appears that the teacher who wanted to follow Jesus was hoping that Jesus would lead him to a better life. Possibly a more prestigious position or prosperous livelihood. It appears that he may have wanted to follow Jesus for what he would eventually *get out of the deal*.



Of course that is nothing new... not now, and not then. Jesus drew a crowd because people were looking for something from Him (healing, feeding, profound teaching).

⁶The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 8:21.

⁷The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 8:22.

And we come today looking for the same kinds of things... and other things too (business contacts, friends, charity, affirmation, etc.).

I think Jesus may be saying to us something along the lines of what He said to that teacher: "If you're looking for me to lead you to merely good **things**, You will likely not receive all that I really have."

If we are following Jesus in hopes of what we'll get in return, we are likely missing all that Jesus really has to offer us. Following Jesus is so much more than mere prosperity. Much more than a mere transaction.

Second is **tradition**: our way of doing things. In the text, this disciple proposed that he go the traditional route... that he tend to the family affairs, and once he had his inheritance, then maybe he could live a luxurious life of following Jesus. That is just how things were done... in our time, in our order, in our way.



I suppose we too miss opportunities because we insist on our ways, our traditions. We displace the Lord's priorities with our own.

I also think we miss following Jesus because we're really merely *doing our traditions* rather than following Jesus. Sometimes we come to a place like this, do things we do in a service like this, sing these songs, say these words, do these ceremonies, not because we are **following Jesus**, but because we are merely **following tradition**.

We might be here today in pursuit of prosperity, and we might be here today in pursuit of tradition... we really need to be here in pursuit of Jesus.



Jesus said it: Follow **Me**.

Let's not follow our own hopes and dreams and aspirations for prosperity.

Let's not merely follow our traditions, or allow ourselves to be distracted by our traditions.

Let's follow Jesus. And I'll say it again, let's receive from Jesus.