

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE SON OF MAN HAS NOWHERE TO LAY HIS HEAD

Matthew 8:19-22

It is not easy being a disciple of Christ because association with God's kingdom means sharing in Jesus' suffering and rejection. Anyone who wants to follow Jesus has to understand that discipleship requires total commitment. In Matthew 8:19-22, Jesus' teaching is about the demands of committed discipleship.

Matthew 8:19. Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go."

20 And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

21 Then another of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."

22 But Jesus said to him, "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

A rash resolution

Here an eager Bible teacher, a certain scribe, approaches Jesus and says, 'Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.' On the surface, these words express an impressive commitment. 'I will follow you wherever You go.' Imagine. Here is a scribe who proclaims his willingness to follow Jesus wherever He would go. The depth of his desire is most unusual because at that time there was constant conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. The scribes opposed Jesus with great hostility, even to the point of plotting to kill Him. But this scribe is very different. He comes to Jesus and says, 'I will follow You anywhere you go.'

If today somebody says in the church, 'I want to follow Jesus wherever He leads me,' we would say, 'Praise the Lord! Alleluiah! We are so happy!' When someone offers himself to follow Christ, the natural reaction is to encourage him. But look at Jesus' answer. It is as though Jesus is suddenly pouring cold water on the head of this scribe. He says to him, 'Before you get too excited about being My disciple, let me first tell you something. You know the foxes? The foxes have holes. You see the birds of the air? They have nests in the trees. But the Son of Man, i.e., Me, has nowhere to lay His head.' In other words, He is saying to this man, 'Before you say that you want to follow Me everywhere, you'd better consider first what is involved in being My disciple.'

From the way Jesus answered, we are led to infer that the scribe made an impulsive decision. Most likely, he had been impressed by the life of the Lord Jesus and by His teaching. He had not encountered another teacher as impressive as Jesus and this kindled his enthusiasm. With this state of mind, he now announces to Jesus that he is Jesus' man.

Jesus was not too impressed because He knows the measure of the scribe's enthusiasm. He saw that the scribe made a rash commitment. A follower of Christ needs to understand that discipleship is not an emotional decision of one moment, but a walk of life.

Jesus' reply was not meant to be a rejection of the scribe's offer nor was it a rebuke for having a deficient determination. Jesus wanted to make sure that the scribe knew what he was doing, warning him about what association with the Son of Man involves. He says, 'Do you know the hardship in being a Christian? Do you really know what is the cost of being My disciple?' The Lord Jesus wants every person to make a commitment having first counted the cost. A person who only responds to Jesus because of an emotional appeal will not last in times of hardship. But a person, having counted the cost with a clear and calm mind, who makes the commitment to follow Jesus to the ends of the earth, this person will hold fast to his confession.

No pillow, no home

The Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head. What exactly do these words mean? Who can say, 'I have nowhere to lay my head?' You can always find somewhere to lay down your head, even if you lie down in a public park. The Lord Jesus could always lie down in some places to rest His head, even if it is in the wilderness. But that is not the point of His statement. He is saying to the scribe, 'If you want to follow Me, then this world cannot be your home. You have to realize that this world is not your home. You are just passing through this world.'

Abraham, the father of faith, had precisely this attitude. Hebrews 11 tells us that Abraham saw himself as a pilgrim passing through the land of promise, dwelling in tents. *By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob* (Hebrews 11:9). This tells us how Abraham regarded that land and how he conducted himself in it. He had nothing of his own in the land and he did not enter into any alliance with people when he was there.

Jesus is giving us this instruction: If you want to be a true disciple of Christ, you must define your relationship to the world. Make clear what is your relation to this world. By the word 'world,' we are not of course talking about the mountains, the trees, the birds, and things of that kind. The 'world' in the Bible refers to a system, a man made system, which is alienated from God, i.e., it does not obey God. And Jesus is telling us not to cultivate friendship with the world. Although the Christian is in the world, he is not of it. He does not belong to the world.

A person who loves the world cannot be a follower of Jesus. 1John 2:15 tells us that, *If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.* We cannot love the world and love God at the same time because the values of the world are not compatible with the values of the kingdom of God. And therefore, Jesus asks us to define clearly our attitude to the world. A disciple of Jesus must understand that following Him means living as a stranger in the world because a choice for Jesus is a choice rejected by many in the world. Many will not follow Jesus and some will even persecute His disciples.

This takes us to the next point. Not having anywhere to lay your head in the way that Jesus did means that you have to endure a certain hardship. So the Lord Jesus is saying, 'Being a Christian can bring a lot of hardship because you will suffer rejection from the world. If you want to follow Me, you have to be prepared to take hardship. If you are not willing to endure hardship, don't even think of following Me.' This is not because God wants us to suffer, but because we are bound to suffer in the course of discipleship. To follow Jesus means to share His persecutions.

We can learn from this incident that Christians don't need to be too desperate to get followers for Jesus. It is clear from the Bible that Jesus wants disciples, but He doesn't want them at any cost. Being totally honest, Jesus took the time to explain to the scribe the hardship of the Christian life even at the risk of losing him.

Conflicting duties

Then another disciple said to Jesus, 'Let me first go and bury my father.' Jesus' answer is again very surprising. 'Leave the dead to bury the dead. As for you, come and follow Me.' This second case is somewhat even more difficult to understand.

We mentioned that the first point was about our relationship to the world. We are required to make a proper stand. We have to admit that this is not always easy, especially when it comes to the question of obligation and of duty. Here, the question is this. The disciple says, 'Let me first go and bury my father. I have an obligation to my father. I need to bury him.' The surprising thing is how the Lord Jesus replied to this man. He says, 'No, no. Come and follow Me. Leave the dead bury the dead.'

The man's request seems quite normal and legitimate. Proper burial was a very important family responsibility. We would think that this man was honoring his parents by taking time to bury his father. And certainly, the Lord's teaching elsewhere is to honor our parents. In fact, in Matthew 15, He severely rebukes the Pharisees for not honoring their father and their mother. He says to them, 'You know the fifth commandment. Honor your father and mother. But although you know it, you still transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition. You must not use your tradition as an excuse to drop your duties to your parents.' Here we are very surprised at Jesus' reply. 'Let the dead bury the dead.' This attitude seems to be contradicting the teaching of the Bible. How are we going to understanding this?

To understand this astonishing reply, we have to understand this matter of our relationship to the obligations of the world. First, notice this. It is not clear from the text whether the father was already dead or whether he was sick and going to die soon. I personally don't think that the father was actually dead. If that were the case, it is very unlikely that this disciple would have been near Jesus. He would have been at home with the mourners because the practice was to bury as soon as possible, within twenty-four hours after death if possible. What was he doing there out in public if his father had died? It is more likely that the man was asking for permission to remain at home until his father's death and burial, and then follow Jesus. The problem with this request is that the responsibilities of the kingdom are being put off until another time. And who knows when that 'better time' will be.

Many people who are interested in following Jesus will plead the requirements of social or family obligations as an excuse for not meeting the requirements of discipleship. They want to wait for a better time to follow and serve Jesus. Jesus rejects such excuses. He is saying that nothing is to block the pursuit of discipleship and nothing is to postpone its start, even when duties and desires conflict with the demands of discipleship. The Lord demands complete loyalty. If this man truly wanted to follow Jesus, he would not wait until he had fulfilled all his traditional responsibilities.

Jesus first

The Lord Jesus is not advising that children should disregard their family responsibilities. Rather, He is responding to this disciple's use of the word 'first.' *Let me **first** go and bury my father.* This word 'first' tells us something about the spirit of this man. There is something that he has to do first before he follows Jesus. He does not ask to go 'for a moment,' or 'at the end of the week,' but 'first,' as if his first consideration is to take care of his parents. Jesus' answer indicates that nothing comes first before the Lord Himself and His work. I have the feeling that if he had asked for permission to take care of his father's burial as a 'secondary' priority that Jesus would have granted it. Or perhaps, if he had not used the word 'first' at all, his request would not have been a problem. Elisha was allowed to go home to say farewell to his family before following Elijah. But listen to the way he made the request. *Please let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you* (I Kings 19:20). He did not ask, 'Let me first say farewell to my parents.'

So the Lord's teaching is this. We must certainly love our father and our mother, our wife and children. The fifth commandment tells us that we are to honour our father and our mother. Paul said to Timothy, *If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever* (1 Timothy 5:8). Now there are sometimes circumstances in which we have to make a choice. We have to choose one or the other because we cannot do both. The point that Jesus is making here is that when we are faced with a choice, we must always love Him more than anybody else. By all means, love your father, love your mother. But always love Jesus more. The Lord Jesus will repeat the same teaching two chapters later in Matthew 10:37. He says, *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.* Discipleship and social obligations sometimes conflict. When this happens, always put Jesus first. The duty of the Lord is higher than any earthly duty, and when one has to yield to the other it must be the lower one. Unless you are prepared to do that, you cannot follow Jesus. 'Unless a man hate his father and his mother, and his own life, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26).'

Jesus says, *Let the dead bury their own dead.* Let those who are dead in sin stay home and take care of the burial of those who are physically dead. What the spiritually dead can do, let them do it. Such response points out that those who follow Him should count the cost and be ready to set aside any conditions they might have. If a person is not willing to abandon everything else that has given him security, then that person will eventually find discipleship too demanding and too costly. With these words, Jesus places commitment to God above all of our priorities.

A divided mind

In the parallel passage of the gospel of Luke, a third person approached Jesus and like the first one, he expressed the desire to follow Him. Let's read Luke 9:61-62.

Luke 9:61. And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house."

62 But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

This man too had something he wanted to do 'first.' 'Let me first go and say farewell. I have something to do first before I do the Lord's work.' The Lord Jesus detected something wrong in his thinking. As we mentioned in the previous case, in the kingdom of God, nothing comes first before the Lord Himself.

So Jesus looks into the heart of this man and He knows his mind. He says to him, *No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.* It is important to see the force of the present continuous tense. It is not just one looking back. The Lord Jesus is talking about someone who keeps on looking back. A person who is looking back all the time is not fit for the kingdom of God. How is he going to follow Jesus if his eyes are always looking at the opposite direction? If a person is going to follow Jesus, he needs to look at Him and keep following Him.

In other words, this last point deals with our affections for the world. By 'affections,' we mean the things that make us keep looking back to the world. This is expressed in the lives of Christians who don't seem to be able to break their connection with the world. Their heart never left completely the attachment to old values. They are like the nation of Israel that looked back after the exodus (Exodus 16:3). Jesus warns us against this lack of clean break from the old way of life. 'If you want to become My disciple, and you are going to keep looking back to the world, I am telling you, you will never make a disciple.' When we commit to Him, we are to hold fast our confession. Discipleship requires undivided loyalty.

Becoming a Christian then is to burn your bridges behind you. There is no turning back. Paul says, 'Forgetting the things which are behind, I press forward towards the mark.' That means to say, 'I have made the decision to go forward and serve the Lord. I don't look back. I look ahead with a singular dedication to the task.'

Discipleship is not a flight-by-night affair. When people express the desire to follow Christ, the Lord wants to make it clear what following Him will entail. To be a Christian means that we must determine our attitude towards the world because following Jesus involves following someone whom the world does not embrace. To be a Christian means that we must define our relationship to the obligations of the world. Even family duties are secondary to one's commitment to God. And finally, to be a Christian means that we must define our affections to the world. There has to be a clearly defined break with the ties of the past.

Following Jesus is tough and costly, but it is worth it because it is to be with God.