

Matthew 8:18-22

‘You can’t spend all your days on the hills.’

That’s an old saying that goes back a very long time, but how true it is. It’s true in your life and mine, and it’s no less true in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When we read verse 1 of Matthew 8, it tells us, ‘when he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him.’ There’s something similar down there in verse 18. That’s not surprising, is it! When you think of the teaching he has just given, this man Jesus has something to say, he’s well worth listening to!

People were hanging on to his every word, he had them eating out of palm of his hand; these folks couldn’t believe what they were hearing. His message was refreshingly new, it was revolutionary, it was radical, it was life-changing, it was cutting-edge, it was geared to kingdom living.

The narrative leaves us in no doubt that Jesus was a real crowd puller, if ever there was one! Having said that, that’s not the prime reason why he said what he said and it’s certainly not the reason for him doing what he did.

If people wanted to throng around him, that’s fine, that’s their choice; he knew in his heart that people are incredibly fickle. He didn’t read too much into his apparent popularity with Joe Public. One minute you have them, the next minute they’re gone! You can go from hero to zero in a few days!

In every crowd, you’ll always get the groupies, you’ll always get those who want to go with the flow, the hangers-on; but, thank God, in the midst of vast numbers, there will always be a significant number who are genuine and

authentic in their commitment to him. What mattered to him was the individual. And that’s what we’ll see in our study this evening.

In Matthew chapters 1-4, we see the person of the king, it shows us clearly who he is. Then we have the principles of the king in chapters 5-7, that’s the highly acclaimed Sermon on the Mount; now we’re focusing on the power of the king in chapters 8 and 9. You see, Jesus has an amazing ability to do things that no-one else is able to do! Here, in chapter 8, Jesus has authority over disease, over disciples, over disaster, and over demons.

Supernatural phenomena in the form of miracles were an integral part of his ministry. Why did he do them? He did them because he wanted to meet ordinary people where they were at. Jesus felt the need to get alongside them in all their humanness, he wanted to show his care and compassion for them in the pits of their desperate need, and he passionately longed to give them a better quality of life.

All of these well-documented miracles looked good on his CV because they considerably enhanced his claim to be the Messiah of Israel. They actually underpinned all that he said about himself. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 1:22 that ‘the Jews require a sign’ and this was one of his ways of attempting to convince them as to who he really was! Signs and wonders were the norm for him.

The Lord also performed miracles to convince the people of saving truth. If you like, they were sermons in action. It was ‘live’ theatre. The people saw it happening before their eyes. They couldn’t write it off as a flash in the pan, they

couldn't even discount it as a seven day wonder; this was real, this was God at work! Even the cynical Nicodemus was hugely impressed with them!

It's worth noting that the miracles in these two chapters are recorded in three groups. Group one goes from 8:1-22, and it shows grace to the outcasts; group two stretches from 8:23 down to 9:17, and it offers peace to the disturbed; group three takes up the closing verses in chapter 9, and its focus is on restoration to the broken!

The title you've assigned to our study this evening is "the cost of following Jesus." The truth is, it doesn't take much to put some people off from following Jesus!

That may appear to be a sweeping statement, a bit of a generalisation; I'm sorry to say, though, it's par for the course, it's true to life. And, to prove the point, we'll examine a couple of situations that fit into that category. Let's lift the lid off these five verses:

When it comes to commitment, the number one turn-off is personal comfort, we find that in chapter 8 verses 18-20; and the number two switch-off is personal riches, we find that in verses 21 and 22.

There's a lot of wannabe's in today's world, people who will gladly follow a leader until they are faced with the real cost of their commitment. The same was true with regard to the Lord Jesus, there were many people who were no more than a face in the crowd who were would-be disciples. But when the crunch came, there was a distinct lack of willingness on their part to go through with it. For them, the price was too great!

The chap that we read of here was an ardent admirer of Jesus. He found Jesus naturally appealing, and he genuinely wanted to be

associated with him. He was happy to be in his company. He was drawn to him. He was hugely impressed with all that Jesus did - for him, Jesus was the greatest teacher he'd ever heard, and he'd heard a lot of big names.

This guy was himself 'a teacher of the law' - in Jewish speak, he was a scribe. They were the authorities in the law - these guys had the official sanction in the Pharisees - they were the only ones qualified to teach the Torah etc. - they were highly educated - they were intensely loyal to the system ... and, in most cases, they were not friendly towards Jesus.

I think most of us are impressed with his apparent enthusiasm to follow Jesus anywhere and everywhere. In fact, by his own admission, he said: 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go!'

For him to do that, it really says something about him, for these guys didn't usually hand out verbal bouquets to teachers who hadn't graduated from one of their schools! It's a lot more than just the old school tie syndrome. That, believe me, was a huge concession for him to make!

The fact is, a strong profession does not necessarily reflect a strong commitment! When Jesus set the agenda, he didn't put a gloss on what was expected of a true disciple. He told it to him straight. He more or less told him that basic home comforts would be few and far between - following Jesus will not guarantee a roof over the man's head; in that sense, even the birds and the foxes were better looked after! At least, they had a place they could call 'home'. It's very interesting to listen in again to what Jesus said to the man - he referred to himself as the Son of Man! That term first appeared away back in Daniel 7 where Daniel prophesied that

the Messiah would be the Son of Man (verse 13). When Jesus came, this is what he said about himself. Again, that's a timely proof of the authority and authenticity of Scripture.

That term appears around 80 times in the 4 gospels - it's a term of humiliation. Son of God speaks of his deity - Son of Man speaks of his humiliation. Jesus was saying: 'In my humiliation, I don't have what the foxes and the birds have - I don't have the basic comforts of life ... and if you're going to follow me, you've got to be willing to pack it all in!'

This religious teacher disappears from the pages of history, we never hear of him again; the next verse has no mention of him; he's gone - he left in the white space between verses 20 and 21.

The Lord's words hit him where he was weak and unwilling. For him, the cost was too high, the level of commitment Jesus was looking for was just too much!

You're maybe wondering, why did Jesus go down this route with him? Well, Jesus could read him like a book - he knew what was going on in this guy's mind. He knew what his hang-up was.

Basically, he was saying something like this:

'Man, my life is full and rich and I've got all I want, my lifestyle satisfied me and I just want to add you to my way of life! I want to take all that I am and all that I have and drag it along and follow you!' The truth is, you don't come to Jesus to get stuff; you follow Jesus to get Jesus.

And there's the challenge we all face: Jesus refuses to cash in on a moment's popularity. If this guy had come right through, think about the front page headlines in the Jerusalem Times and the impact it would have! When it comes to discipleship, some folks want the easy option - they want to do their own thing - they want to

have their cake and eat it too. It's easy to talk the talk, but are we willing to walk the walk?

Potential disciple number two came to Jesus and said: 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father!' This guy was similar to the man we spoke about earlier, the big difference between them was this man's allegiance to his family.

Let me say this before we go any further - we read in verse 21 that 'another disciple said to Jesus' - the word 'disciple' in that statement of fact is not an official word with a capital D. It simply means someone who is a learner, a follower - and, at this point, Jesus has a lot of people following him for one reason or another. This person was not one of the Twelve, he was one of the many!

His request is a most interesting one, but there's a lot more to it than meets the eye! I mean, on the surface, it all sounds very reasonable and plausible, doesn't it? You can't leave a dead man lying around - he needs to be six feet under! The Jews didn't embalm the body, so that was all the more reason to have a fast burial.

On top of that, the Jews taught that you needed 30 days to mourn the passing of your mother or father - so maybe this guy is saying: 'Give me a month to get things sorted out at home and then I'll jump on the bandwagon.'

By the way, in Genesis, it tells us that the last responsibility of a son in his final act of devotion to his parents was to make sure that he cared for their interment. So ... at face value, it all sounds perfectly logical and very reasonable!

That said, the words which the man used are no more than a figure of speech from that part of the world. It referred to a son's responsibility to help in the family business until the father died and the inheritance was distributed.

The chances are, this man's father hadn't died as yet, so his son was wanting to postpone his commitment to follow Jesus, he wanted to put it on the back burner until it was more opportune, more convenient, in terms of time and business. He's wanting to call all the shots and do it when it fits into his schedule!

Sure, he followed the Lord for a few weeks or months, he heard all the great preaching, he saw the many miracles, he was aware of the life-changing stories. He had so much going for him. Yes, he wanted to follow Jesus, we don't doubt that, but he wanted to do it on his terms, he wanted to do it when it suited him! He was serious, he was sincere. Sure, he was. And you know as well as I do, that kind of commitment is no commitment at all; it's not the kind of response that carries any favours with Jesus, it doesn't really impress him.

It's a shame, for this young man had loads of potential, he had a bright future in the kingdom of God, but he was divided in his loyalties, his heart was being pulled in both directions; if you like, he was tied to his parents apron strings, as well as that, he didn't want to write himself out of their will.

His father meant more to him than Jesus, his financial windfall when the old man died meant more to him than Jesus. And, like the first bloke in the narrative, this one slips off the page between verses 22 and 23.

To this day, Jesus isn't looking for a half-hearted commitment, he's looking for men and women of all ages to follow him with no strings attached, he's looking for people who will abandon themselves unreservedly to him.

The question is: where do we fit in? You see, when you come to Jesus, he may not want to take away your personal comforts, he may not

want to erase your personal relationships, but we have to be willing to let him if he wanted to. That's the bottom line!

That begs the question: What is top priority in your life, what matters more to us than anything else? Is it Jesus plus nothing? Can we truly sing: 'All to Jesus I surrender, all to him I freely give.' You see, Jesus is worthy of unconditional trust and he is worthy of undivided affection.

Jesus cuts to the chase in both these illustrations - it's a powerful reminder that nothing else will satisfy Him - and nothing less is good enough! It's a case of you and me, on bended knee, before that higher throne, saying: 'I surrender all!' He's calling us to follow him with 100% commitment. It pays to follow Jesus. It costs to follow Jesus. May God help us so to do.