

Matthew 8:18-22

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As the crowds gather around Jesus, He gives orders to His disciples to go “to the other side” of the sea of Galilee where the Gentiles live. Two disciples come to Him, one who expresses willingness to follow, the other who mentions an obligation. Jesus gives them both sobering answers about the commitment that following Him will require.

The parallel accounts of this event are found in Mark 4:35 and Luke 8:22; 9:57-62.

The casting out of demons drew *a crowd around Jesus*. When He saw this gathering crowd, Jesus made what appears to be a sudden decision. Matthew indicates this by beginning this remark with *now*. As the *crowd* was around Him, He gave orders to His disciples to depart to the other side of the sea. The phrase, *the other side of the sea*, did not merely mean a geographical relocation. It was akin to going to another country to where the Gentiles lived. It meant crossing the sea to the Decapolis, on the eastern shore of the lake. Although only a few miles away, culturally it was another world. The Decapolis city of Hippas stood on the crest of a hill on the eastern shore. The Decapolis was the Roman province that formed around the ten Greek cities established in the wake of Alexander the Great’s conquests. Jesus and His *disciples* were departing a Jewish world to go to a Gentile world.

The *orders to depart to the other side* appear to be a startling change of course and unusual path for a Jewish Rabbi to take. It is one thing for the Gentiles to come to Him from miles around seeking healing. Now the Rabbi is going to them. Matthew does not give an overt reason why Jesus would make this move. He only writes that *when Jesus saw a crowd around Him is when He gave the orders*. Perhaps Jesus is trying to seek rest from the *crowds*. (A few hours later He is tired enough to fall fast asleep on a boat while a terrifying storm threatens to drown all on board—Matthew 8:24-25). Maybe Jesus decides to leave because He sees through selfish motives or hard-heartedness of the crowds. He will later chastise the very Jewish northern shore of Galilee for their lack of faith (Matthew 11:21-24).

But on a different level, Jesus going *to the other side* was always part of God’s plan. Even though Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, the good news of the Gospel is for all people. For the Jews and Gentiles alike. By traveling to the other side where the people of Greece and Rome lived, Jesus brings the light of the good news to them in a very tangible and powerful way. His “mission trip” provides a glimpse of the final *orders* He will give His disciples in what is described as “the Great Commission.”

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.”
(Matthew 28:16-20)

In less than three years, these same disciples that Jesus gives *orders to depart to the other side* to minister to the Gentile world will be doing this very thing on a much larger scale; they will

launch a transmission of the gospel to the entire world. *Jesus* is training them by example and invitation. In the process of issuing these *orders*, *Jesus* requires a greater level of commitment from His disciples.

Matthew tells us that after these *orders* were given, two men who had been following *Jesus* approached *Him* to tell *Him* something.

The first was *a scribe*. Matthew leaves this *scribe* unnamed. Scribes were experts of the Law. They studied it continuously. Scribes knew God's Word in great detail. They were the lawyers of the Old Testament. Scribes were often associated with the Pharisees throughout the Gospel narratives (Matthew 5:20, 12:38, 15:1, 23:2, 23:29, Mark 2:16, 7:5, Luke 5:30, 11:53, John 8:3). In other instances, scribes plotted with the chief priests, the party of the Sadducees, as to how they might kill Jesus (Mark 15:1, Luke 22:2, 23:10) and mocked Him at His death (Matthew 27:41, Mark 15:31). It is not entirely clear whether or not this particular *scribe* is *a disciple of Jesus*.

This scribe could be an unnamed follower, someone who only temporarily followed Jesus for a short period of time (John 6:66), or a present admirer. This *scribe* is certainly not James, John, Peter, or Andrew because they were fisherman. The only other disciple's occupation mentioned in Scripture is Matthew's, who was a tax collector. In his remark to *Jesus*, the *scribe* shows a degree of admiration for *Him*. He addresses *Jesus* as *Teacher* and expresses enthusiasm to go with *Him to the other side*. The *scribe said to Him, I will follow You wherever You go*.

Jesus's response to the enthusiastic *scribe* is interesting. He says, *The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head*. Jesus is telling the scribe that if he is going to *follow Him wherever He goes*, then he will have to give up his home. Foxes have *holes in the ground* for homes and *birds have nests* for homes, but the Messiah has *nowhere to lay His head*. The Messiah's home or identity is not to be found in this world. If this *scribe* is to *follow Jesus*, then his identity can't be found in this world either. He will have to leave his identity and home behind.

Matthew is silent about this scribe's response. We do not know if he followed *Jesus* or not after *Jesus said this to him*.

Within Jesus's response to the *scribe* is the first occurrence of *Jesus* using the phrase *Son of Man*. It is a reference to Himself. In total, the four gospels will use the term *Son of Man* eighty-four times. All but two of these occurrences are found in Jesus's own word. One exception is from Mark 9:9 where the writer summarizes directives that *Jesus* gave to three of His disciples. The other is in John 12:34, where the crowd repeats the phrase Jesus just used to describe Himself. So, every occurrence of *Son of Man* in the gospels is either directly or indirectly attributed and applied to *Jesus*.

What does *Jesus* mean by this regularly repeated phrase?

The phrase *Son of Man* comes from the poetic and prophetic books of the Old Testament. Outside of the exiled prophets of Ezekiel and Daniel, the phrase is largely a synonym for "man" or "mankind" (Job 25:6, Psalm 8:4, 146:3, Isaiah 56:2, Jeremiah 50:40). This generic meaning

was also thought to be employed in the Aramaic language of Jesus's day as a term meaning "the man" or "someone."

The phrase *Son of Man* appears in the book of Ezekiel ninety times. In that book, it refers to the prophet Ezekiel. It might emphasize Ezekiel's frailty and humanity, or perhaps it is Ezekiel's way of identifying himself with his people.

The book of Daniel uses the phrase *Son of Man* with potent Messianic overtones in chapter 7. The prophet's vision and interpretation of his vision in this chapter are both apocalyptic and messianic. The phrase itself occurs at the end of Daniel's vision about the four beasts and the Ancient of Days. It is in verse 13:

"I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.

And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed. "
(Daniel 7:13-14)

Daniel says that the Ancient of Days (God Almighty) will present everlasting dominion over all peoples to "One" who is "like a *Son of Man*." It appears that the prophet is struggling for vocabulary to describe that this awesome Being who approaches the Ancient of Days is somehow also human. Daniel's vision is of the victorious, glorified, and Incarnate Lord who has come to claim His own. Daniel's use of *Son of Man* in this instance describes the humanity of the conquering, divine Messiah.

An angel explains to Daniel what the vision means:

"Then the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him."
(Daniel 7:27)

This interpretation refers to "One who is like a *Son of Man*" in verse 13 as "the Highest One" in verse 27. We know this because both descriptions are used to describe the One who receives all dominion, service, and an everlasting kingdom which will not be destroyed. In using the title "the Highest One" Daniel identifies the "One like the *Son of Man*" as God. This is a prophecy that the Messiah will somehow be both God and human. It is a prophecy that *Jesus* fulfilled. Moreover as the Messiah, Jesus's kingdom message in Matthew's gospel (and especially in the

Sermon on the Mount) is an unpacking of Daniel's prophecy that "the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole of heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One" (Daniel 7:27).

Throughout the Old Testament and in Jesus's day, the phrase *Son of Man* could mean any of three things. It could mean a man or an expression for "somebody;" it could be an expression to emphasize humanity and to identify with the experience of his nation in exile, as used by Ezekiel; and it could be a messianic term associated with God who would one day be given all power and authority as a human.

Describing Himself with this term, *Jesus* probably meant all three usages. As a common expression it would not necessarily attract unwanted attention when He said this of Himself. *Jesus* was careful not to fully reveal His divine identity, which allowed people the opportunity to know Him by faith. In so doing, it was a general phrase meaning that He was a human, tempted like other humans (Hebrews 2:17-28), while also meaning that He was the divine Messiah. At the same time, *Jesus* also uses it like Ezekiel, as a way of identifying with both His frail humanity and with those He had come to save in the suffering in the exile of their sin and the political oppression of earthly tyrants.

In this particular instance where *Jesus* confesses to the *scribe* that *the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head*, the humanity is stressed, but the messianic meaning might have pricked the ears of any discerning Jewish *scribe*.

After this interaction, Matthew tells us that a second unnamed man made a request to *Jesus*. This man is clearly a disciple by the fact that Matthew calls him *another of the disciples*. *Another* is somewhat ambiguous in its meaning here. It could refer to the *scribe* previously mentioned and include the *scribe* among *the disciples*, or it could be a way of saying one of *Jesus's disciples*. This disciple could have been any of the twelve or among the broader group of those following *Jesus* at that time, perhaps from the crowd of disciples who had heard His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-2).

This disciple calls *Jesus Lord*. He asks *Jesus* to *permit* him *first to go and bury his father*. He indicates that he has family obligations that he must tend to and fulfill before he can follow *Jesus* fully. Out of respect for *Jesus*, he is seeking permission from his *Lord* to fulfill his familial responsibilities first, before continuing to *follow* Him. *Jesus* tells him that he will have to make a choice: either *follow Me* or stay home. *Follow Me, and allow the dead to bury their own dead*. This command aligns with what *Jesus* taught earlier that day in the Sermon on the Mount, when He said, "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24). *Jesus* expects total commitment from His followers. He wants them to be willing to serve others in His name to the death.

"And He was saying to them all, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.'"
(Luke 9:23-24)

“This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”
(John 15:12-13)

Disciples cannot do these things if they are more concerned about pleasing others than they are about pleasing Jesus. There is no following *Jesus* halfway, if they desire to please the *Lord*.

It was likely this disciple was not asking permission for a short leave to attend a funeral. It is more likely he was saying he needed to provide for his elderly father until he passed. So it could be months or years. The Bible is clear about the time for obedience, it is always “today” (Hebrews 3:7). In each case, of both the *scribe* as well as *another of the disciples*, it seems their request was precipitated by Jesus’ command to *depart to the other side of the sea*. Perhaps they were uncertain how long Jesus intended to stay on the *other side of the sea*. They might have been asking in a roundabout way “What’s the plan?” Jesus does not accommodate their reluctance. He just tells them to *Follow Me*.

Biblical Text

18 Now when Jesus saw a crowd around Him, He gave orders to depart to the other side of the sea. 19 Then a scribe came and said to Him, “Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.” 20 Jesus said to him, “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” 21 Another of the disciples said to Him, “Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.” 22 But Jesus said to him, “Follow Me, and allow the dead to bury their own dead.”