

## Matthew 8:18-22

### Introduction: Contradictions in the Bible?

(See the “Comparison Chart” on page 7)

As we are reading in chapter eight, one of the things we notice is that verse 18 leads naturally into verse 23 – “Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side... And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him.” In fact, this is exactly how Mark (4:35-41) and Luke (8:22-25) tell the story. Mark doesn’t have the story about the two would-be disciples anywhere in his gospel. Luke has the story, but he puts it in a different spot (9:57-62). In Luke, we find Jesus sending messengers ahead of Himself to prepare for His coming to a village of the Samaritans. And it was as Jesus went along the road on His way to the Samaritan village that Jesus encountered the two would-be disciples.

So which one do you think preserves the actual chronological order here – Matthew or Luke? In general, Luke writes more chronologically (cf. Luke 1:1-4). The language in Luke’s account seems to assume chronological order and it definitely requires that Jesus be going along the road to another city (“as they were going along the road”). However, the language in Matthew’s account does not clearly assume chronological order. Matthew says: “**AND** a scribe came up and said to him...” He *doesn’t* say: “**THEN** a scribe came up and said to him...” (NASB). In fact Matthew’s account actually seems a little “stilted” from a chronological viewpoint. When we first read this passage we can easily be confused about whether the two would-be disciples came to Jesus *before* or *after* He had crossed over to the other side (read it and see for yourself!).

In Matthew’s day, people didn’t automatically assume (as we do in our day) that where you put the story in your book is where it actually happened chronologically. Yes, Matthew means for us to *envision* that this story happens within the context that he gives us, but this does not *require* that it actually did happen in this context (and there is nothing in Matthew’s wording that would require this either). What *we* think of as erroneous, or contradictory, or misleading would not have been any of those things in Matthew’s day.

We’ve already seen that Matthew often groups things together topically. In fact, we are right now in the middle of a topical collection of miracle stories that Matthew has arranged in three sets of three with two “teaching” interludes (chapters 8-9). This is the first teaching interlude in the collection of miracle stories. So it would seem that Matthew has taken a story that actually happened on a different day and in a different setting and “plugged” it in right here – in the middle of a story that Mark and Luke both tell without any “interruption.”

Now why do I take the time to explain all of this? First of all, because I want us to see that just because two biblical accounts differ doesn’t mean that one of them is wrong. We believe that the Bible is the inspired, authoritative, and infallible Word of *God*. The Bible not only claims these things for itself, but we see these things *evidenced* in powerful and compelling ways over and over again throughout the pages of Scripture! So when we come to an apparent contradiction or discrepancy, the only *logical* and *reasonable* thing to do is to assume that there is a solution and that it will eventually reveal itself. The unbeliever comes to this account and automatically

assumes a contradiction between Matthew and Luke because he starts out assuming that the Bible cannot be the infallible Word of God. The believer comes to this account and is able to see without too much trouble at all that there is no real contradiction. There is no error. In fact, the *differences* between the Gospels actually increase our confidence in their accuracy and reliability. If the church was inventing things, they would certainly have tried to make things more uniform!

But this leads me, then, to the second reason that I took the time to point out all of these things. If Matthew did not mistakenly think that the story of the two would-be disciples actually happened at the Sea of Galilee (and there's no reason to think he did), then *why* did he include it here? In order to answer this question, let's turn to our text.

**Verse 18** – “Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders [commandment] to go over to the other side.”

In Mark and Luke, Jesus says: “Let us go across to the other side.” But right from the very start of the story, Matthew begins to emphasize the lordship and authority of Jesus (“He gave commandment”). Jesus is not simply one who heals so that people feel better, Jesus is the one who *commands* so that His *true* disciples *obey*. The authority of Jesus over every kind of sickness is not just a happy coincidence for us, but rather a sure sign of His authority over us.

When Jesus gave commandment to go over to the other side, He was speaking of the other side of the Sea of Galilee. So what was on the other side? Well, it was the mostly non-Jewish area called Decapolis. This was a place away from home-base in Capernaum (of Galilee), a place that most Jews would not want to visit (since it was unclean), and a place where Jesus could not expect to receive any offers of a place to stay (cf. 8:28-34). But this is exactly the place that Jesus *commanded* his disciples to go to (He Himself planning to go with them). And my guess is that this reminded Matthew of the day when Jesus was walking along the road toward a village of the Samaritans. Luke tells us that “as they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you *wherever you go*.” But where was Jesus going? On that particular day, Jesus had already been turned away from one Samaritan village and He was then on His way to another village still looking for a place to stay (Luke 9:51-56). And so on this day (in Matthew 8), when Jesus gives the *command* to go to *Decapolis* (which will prove itself to be no different from than the Samaritan village; Mat. 8:34), Matthew is reminded of *all* those who would offer to follow Jesus *wherever* He goes. That's why he inserts here the true story of just such a man.

**Verse 19** – “And a scribe came up and said to him, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.””

This scribe didn't really know what he was saying, but he was obviously very enthusiastic. He was excited and optimistic. And shouldn't this be *encouraged*? What person who offered to follow Jesus wherever He went would not be rewarded with a place in the kingdom? Indeed, shouldn't Jesus be glad to have someone offering to be His follower? After all, those who followed Jesus everywhere were few and far between! Which of us would not immediately take someone up on an offer like this? Which of us would not be impressed with this scribe and look upon him with admiration?

**Verse 20** – “And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have [roosting places], but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’”

Whether it’s passing through the villages of the Samaritans, or spending time in Decapolis, Jesus often had no certainty of lodging, and there would have been many nights when He slept in more exposed places than even the foxes and the birds (cf. France). In Matthew’s account, Jesus will find Himself that very night sleeping in a boat in the middle of a storm. So what in the world is Jesus trying to say to the scribe? (“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have roosting places, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”) This may be true, but it doesn’t seem like the way to encourage potential followers! Why not ease this man in gently and slowly and give him time to adjust?

Well, Jesus saw that in spite of this scribe’s noble offer, it was still an *offer*, and he was making it on his own terms. In Matthew, those who call Jesus “teacher” (as the scribe did) are always those who have a deficient understanding of who Jesus is. This scribe thought he was doing Jesus a favor instead of seeing that he actually owed Jesus his very life and allegiance as his Master and Lord. This scribe thought that as was usual with most of the rabbi’s of his day, Jesus would accept whoever signed up. You see, he was “offering” to sign up instead of *responding* to the sovereign and authoritative call of Jesus upon his life. And everyone who starts out with Jesus apart from the realization of His *Lordship* will ultimately fizzle and fall away – proving that there was no true faith to begin with.

Are there any reading this who find themselves to be no different than the scribe? Is your Christianity an offer you made to God, or is it your response to the absolute and sovereign demands of His lordship? Which one is it? As for the scribe, Jesus calls his bluff and warns him to stop playing games. Following Jesus requires that we be willing to fully identify with His lot in life and do all that He *commands* – even if this means that we end up with no place to lay our head at night. “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 in the world’ (1 Pet. 1:1).” (Blomberg) To anyone who is willing to follow Jesus only to a certain point, and to anyone whose “following” is not really a response to the sovereign call of His lordship, Jesus says: Stop playing games; stop deceiving yourself; don’t bother following Me at all – but know that judgment is coming. There are many who follow Jesus everywhere, and yet their following does not flow from a true submission to His lordship.

**Verse 21** – “Another of the disciples said to him, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’”

“Disciple” does not necessarily mean “committed follower”. Blomberg says that “disciple” can refer to “anyone who follows along with Jesus and shows some kind of interest in him.” So in John chapter six, Jesus’ disciples grumbled about Jesus’ words and then they turned back and no longer walked with Him (John 6:60-61, 66; cf. 6:70). This disciple is not yet truly and fully committed to Jesus. So Luke tells us what Matthew assumes: Jesus has already called upon this “casual” disciple to become a *true* disciple. To this disciple, Jesus gave the *command* (Greek imperative): “*Follow me.*” The scribe voluntarily *offered* to follow Jesus, but here it is Jesus who *commands* the disciple to follow Him! Do you see how there is a difference! Though the scribe *should* have understood the authority of Jesus, he could still deceive himself into thinking that he

could offer to follow Jesus *apart* from a full submission to His lordship. But when Jesus actually calls the disciple with His sovereign and authoritative word, it's no longer possible for the disciple to deceive himself as the scribe did. So while the scribe said: "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go", it was the disciple who said: "**Lord, let me first go and bury my father.**" Contrary to the scribe, the disciple clearly understood that following Jesus could only be a response to the absolute and sovereign demands of His lordship.

With regard to the disciple's request, it seems very clear to me that the disciple's father was not already dead. If he was, then this disciple would not have been at the side of the road talking to Jesus. Already 500 years ago, Calvin wrote: "It is probable that his father was in extreme old age... the expression, *Permit me to bury*, implies that he had but a short time to live." We really don't know how long the father had to live. What we do know is that this disciple assumed that as a son, his responsibilities and obligations to his father would make it legitimate and even *necessary* to put off following Jesus until after his father died. We need to see that there is nothing wrong with what the disciple asks to be allowed to do. In fact, under normal circumstances this would definitely be the only *right* thing to do. Under normal circumstances this would be the only possible way to keep the fifth commandment ("Honor your father and your mother"). So the disciple's request could very naturally be *expected* of any *godly* person!

**Verse 22** – "And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."

Jesus first of all repeats(!) His sovereign and authoritative and absolute word of *command*: "Follow me." When Jesus gave this command the first time, He was already aware of the man's family responsibilities and of everything else about him (cf. John 4). So what we have to understand is that there is *nothing* that could possibly cause Jesus to realize that His command to this disciple was premature or misguided! When Jesus calls, His call is *indisputable and absolute*, no matter how legitimate we might think our hesitations are.

"Follow me", Jesus said, "and leave the dead to bury their own dead." At first glance (and even at second and third and fourth glance), this sounds very harsh. But we need to remember first of all that Jesus explicitly condemned all those who refuse to honor their father and mother (Mark 7:9-13). ***However we understand Jesus' words, we cannot think that they would plant thoughts in the mind of this disciple that were dishonoring to his father.*** Second of all, we need to see that Jesus is not just defensively rebuking the disciple's request! If that was the case, then I think we probably could assume that his answer was very rude indeed! ***It's very important for us to see that Jesus is proactively seeking to teach this disciple—and all of us—an important spiritual lesson.*** So what is this spiritual lesson, and how can it be harmonized with the seemingly unspiritual language?

Since it's obviously impossible for the physically dead to care for or bury others who are dead, I assume that Jesus is talking about the *spiritually* dead. The New Living Translation says: "Let the spiritually dead bury their own dead" (cf. most commentators; the prodigal son in Luke 15:24, 32). But now notice that Jesus didn't say: "Leave the dead to bury *the* dead." What He said was: "Leave the dead to bury *their own* dead." So let me ask you: Whom can the spiritually dead appropriately claim as ***their OWN*** dead? I would answer: Only those who are *spiritually*

dead! If Jesus is referring to the spiritually dead the first time, then why shouldn't he be referring to the spiritually dead the second time? They, too, will need to be cared for and buried!

So what is the lesson Jesus is trying to teach us? I am convinced it is this: Only the son who is spiritually dead will let family obligations stand in the way of submitting to the sovereign and absolute lordship of Jesus Christ. *And* only the father who is spiritually dead will use family obligations to keep his son from submitting to the sovereign and absolute lordship of Jesus Christ. Therefore, no matter how spiritual it may sound, there cannot possibly be any good or legitimate reason to resist the sovereign demands of Jesus upon our lives. They truly are indisputable, uncompromising, and absolute! To the disciple who has been summoned by Jesus, but yet wonders about his father, Jesus says: If this is really a problem, then it is better to *leave* the world of spiritually dead sons burying (caring for) spiritually dead fathers – so that *you* might be among those who truly *live*! John Calvin says: “[Jesus] intended... to show that **whatever** withdraws us from the right course, or retards us in it, deserves no other name than *death*. Those *only* live, [Jesus] tells us, who devote *all their thoughts*, and *every part of their life*, to **obedience** to God.” And I would add that in His answer to the scribe, Jesus tells us that everyone else should stop pretending.

## Conclusion

Matthew doesn't tell us if the scribe ended up following Jesus. My assumption is that he didn't. Jesus never summoned the scribe to follow Him. Instead, He simply warned him about playing games. But Jesus did command the disciple to follow Him – *twice*. Apart from this text, there are five different instances in the Bible where Jesus summoned people to follow Him, and in each of these instances there was never any doubt about the response (Mat. 4:18-22; 9:9; Jn. 1:43-45; 21:19-22; contra Mat. 19:21). In response to the sovereign and absolute summons of Jesus, they *all left everything* to follow Him (cf. Rom. 8:29-30). In Luke, Jesus says to the disciple: “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. *But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.*” And I believe we are meant to understand that this is exactly what the disciple did.

There are numerous “Christians” today who have simply *offered* to sign up with Jesus and then proceeded to “follow” Him... instead of actually *responding* to the sovereign and authoritative and absolute call of Jesus upon their lives. And there is a world of difference between offering and responding. I'm reminded of what Jesus says in Matthew 22:14 – “For many are called [invited; NIV], but few are chosen [summoned].”

So what kind of “Christian” are you? Have you signed up to follow after Jesus completely of your *own* accord, or have you responded to an absolute *summons* from the *Master*? May we be those who *truly* follow after Jesus – not like the scribe who offered to “sign up” just because he wanted to, but like the disciple who joyfully followed Jesus **because he was commanded**. We can be *assured* that if we have any *true* desires for *genuine* discipleship, then we *have* heard his summons! We *have* felt the *demands* of His lordship and we *have left everything* to follow Him. So... Have we? Have *you*? *Won't* you? And if so, be sure to give *Him* all of the glory, for it is *all* of His grace.

## Teaching our Children

- Q.** When Jesus saw the crowds around Him, where did He *command* His disciples to go?  
**A.** Jesus commanded His disciples to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.
- Q.** What will it be like on the other side of the Sea of Galilee?  
**A.** It will be away from home. There will probably not be any place for Jesus to sleep at night. Jesus will not be welcome (Mat. 8:34; compare with the Samaritan village – Luke 9:52-53).
- Q.** Is it *easy* to follow Jesus?  
**A.** No! (Reflect on Phil. 3:20 & 1 Pet. 3:1)
- Q.** What offer did the scribe make to Jesus?  
**A.** The scribe said: “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”
- Q.** Do you think that most people would be impressed with the scribe?  
**A.** Yes. Most people would think that Jesus should encourage this scribe and accept his offer.
- Q.** What was the problem with the scribe’s offer?  
**A.** ~ He probably thought he was helping Jesus out and doing Him a favor.  
~ When he offered to follow Jesus, he was not obediently responding to a *command* from Jesus (“Teacher” vs. “Lord”).  
~ He was “excited” to follow Jesus, but he didn’t really understand that he was *required* to follow Jesus.
- Q.** What did Jesus say to the scribe?  
**A.** “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.’”
- Q.** Does this sound very encouraging?  
**A.** No!
- Q.** Why did Jesus respond this way to the scribe?  
**A.** Jesus was warning the scribe to stop “playing games.” The scribe should not follow Jesus if his “following” did not come from a true submission to Jesus as Lord (Master).
- Q.** When Jesus said to the disciple (the second man), “Follow me”, was it a suggestion or a command?  
**A.** It was a *command!* (Reflect on this with your children)
- Q.** What did this disciple think that he needed to do *first* (*before* he went to follow after Jesus)?  
**A.** He thought that he needed stay home and care for his father until he died (cf. *the 5<sup>th</sup> comm.*)
- Q.** How did Jesus respond to the disciple?  
**A.** “Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me [another *command!*], and leave the dead to bury their own dead.’”
- Q.** When Jesus said this, what important lesson was He teaching the disciple?  
**A.** ~ Jesus was teaching the disciple that only fathers and sons who are spiritually dead will let their relationship stand in the way of obeying the command of Jesus.  
~ It is better to obey Jesus (*no matter what*) and be spiritually alive than to disobey Jesus (for seemingly good reasons) and be spiritually dead.
- Q.** When Jesus calls *us* to follow Him, is it a command, or a suggestion?  
**A.** It is a *command!* (From the one who took our illnesses and bore our diseases! – 8:17)

### Exhort your children:

- ✓ May we *truly* follow after Jesus – not like the scribe who offered to “sign up” just because he wanted to, but like the disciple who joyfully followed Jesus **because he was commanded.**

## Comparison Chart

### Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."

And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

### Matthew 8:18-27

Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, *he gave orders* to go over to the other side.

And *a scribe* came up and said to him, "*Teacher*, I will follow you wherever you go." 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." *Another of the disciples* said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing." And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"

### Luke (two separate passages)

**LUKE 8:22a** – One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake."

Luke 9:57-62 – *As they were going along the road*, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." 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." *To another he said, "Follow me."* But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. *But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.*"

Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

**LUKE 8:22b-25** – So they set out, and as they sailed he fell asleep. And a windstorm came down on the lake, and they were filling with water and were in danger. And they went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased, and there was a calm. He said to them, "Where is your faith?" And they were afraid, and they marveled, saying to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?"