

## INTRODUCTION

As we study the parables of Jesus in the Gospel According to Matthew I'm not just restricting myself to the classic parables that tell a story. I'm also teaching on the verses where Jesus employed word pictures and metaphors to communicate spiritual truth. So in this message we're going to examine two short parables that I'm calling "The Parables of Foxes and Funerals."

Coming to Jesus for salvation is a relatively easy process, but following Jesus as a disciple is more challenging. Coming to Christ is an act of faith, but being a disciple of Jesus is a lifestyle that requires true commitment.

A little skinny guy applied for a job as a lumberjack at a large lumber company. The head lumberjack looked at him and said, "You're too little to be a good lumberjack." The guys aid, "Just give me a chance to show you what I can do." The boss said, "Okay. See that giant tree over there? Take this axe and cut it down." The boss smiled and headed back into the office knowing it would take the little guy all day to cut that tree down. But five minutes later the guy was knocking on the boss's door. He said, "I cut that one down, do you have another one?" The boss looked and, sure enough, the tree was lying on the ground. He said, "Man, where in the world did you learn to chop wood like that?" The little guy said, "Oh, I used to work in the Sahara Forest." The boss said, "There's no Sahara Forest, it's the Sahara Desert." The little guy smiled and said, "Well, that's what they call it NOW."

Sometimes the people Jesus called to be His disciples didn't appear to be the most qualified candidates. Instead of choosing educated rabbis to be His disciples, Jesus chose a ragtag group including ignorant and uneducated fishermen, a tax-collector, a rebel, and a doubter. But these twelve disciples weren't the only men who followed Jesus. There were many wannabe disciples, including the two we meet in 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 of the air 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.'"

Thousands wanted to be around Jesus, but only a few really *wanted* to be His disciple. They wanted miracles and He wanted to make disciples. He wasn't interested the crowd—He was looking for the committed. So after He and the disciples sailed to the other side of the lake, He encountered two unnamed men who indicated a desire to be His disciple. Are you just part of the crowd, or do you have a desire to be a part of the committed? Do you want to be more than just a believer? Do you want to be a true disciple?

I recently read some comments by comedian Yakov Smirnoff, who immigrated to America from the Ukraine in the late 70s. He said when he first visited an American grocery store, he was surprised at all the products that offered instant results, like instant coffee: Just add water and you had coffee. He said, "I saw powdered milk. All you had to do was add water and you had

milk. I saw powdered orange juice—you just add water and you had orange juice. Then I saw baby powder and I thought to myself, ‘Wow, what a country!’”

Somewhere along the way we got the idea that discipleship is easy: Just add water, get baptized, and voilà! You’re a disciple. But it’s not that easy. There is no shortcut to being a disciple. In this passage we discover two important lessons about the cost of discipleship.

## **I. THE PARABLE OF FOXES AND BIRDS**

We don’t know the names of these two wannabe disciples, so I’ll give them fictitious names in order to distinguish between them. Let’s call the first guy Samuel. We know a little about Sam’s background because he is called “a teacher of the law” and other translations call him a “scribe.” The term “scribe” is found 55 times in the Gospels, but it doesn’t refer to an occupation of copying scrolls as much as it was a religious/political group. A modern example is that some men who belong to the Masons have never laid a brick. Usually the scribes are always mentioned along with the Pharisees. It might help to think about them as members of religious Rotary and Kiwanis clubs. The scribes and Pharisees only accepted the most educated, successful men into their ranks, so we can infer that Sam was successful and lived a comfortable life.

There is no reason for us to doubt Sam’s sincerity as he approached Jesus and used the ultimate term of respect. He said, “Rabbi. I will follow you where ever you go!” Can’t you hear his enthusiasm? “I’m ready! I’m your man! Let’s do it!” I can imagine Jesus smiled and looked him right into the eyes and said, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” What did Jesus mean? Let’s first examine what Jesus was NOT saying.

### **A. MISAPPLICATION: Jesus isn’t saying we must adopt a life of poverty**

Some people have taken this verse to mean since Jesus didn’t own a home Christians shouldn’t own anything either. Some Christians actually take a vow of poverty, including some Catholic priests and nuns, and they’re to be commended for their dedication. However, in their case, the Catholic Church provides them with clothes, cars, houses, and food. Of all the people who indicated a desire to follow Jesus, there was only one person who was told, “Go, sell all you have and follow me.” Jesus said that to the rich young ruler because he already had a god—his possessions. If you allow your money and your possessions to be your god, then, by all means, get rid of them, but poverty isn’t a requirement for discipleship.

But there have always been wealthy people who have supported the cause of Christ. A rich man provided a tomb for Jesus, and we know there were wealthy people in the early church. In 1 Timothy 6 Paul didn’t instructed Timothy to tell those who were rich to get rid of their wealth. He told them not to *trust* in their wealth. The Bible *doesn’t* say, “money is the root of all evil.” It says, “The LOVE of money is the root of all evil.”

### **B. PERSONAL APPLICATION: When Jesus calls I must be willing to leave my comfort zone**

Jesus didn't tell Sam to go sell his possessions, but He did tell him that he must be willing to make some adjustments. He would have to leave his comfort zone if he became a disciple. I once read that a pastor's job is not only to comfort the afflicted, but to also afflict the comfortable.

God uses people who are willing to leave their comfort zones. The Bible is filled with examples of this. Abraham was in his comfort zone when God said, "Head out for a land where I'll show you when you get there." Moses was in his comfort zone tending sheep when God said, "Go to Pharaoh and tell him I said to let my people go!" Nicodemus was in his religious comfort zone and Jesus said, "You must be born again." But the greatest example of this was when Jesus was in the comfort zone of heaven, being co-equal and co-eternal with God the Father. Because of His great love for us, Jesus chose to leave this comfort zone to travel to this world to give His life for us. Are you willing to follow Jesus, even if it means leaving your comfort zone?

### **C. GOD'S MESSAGE: "TRUST ME WITH YOUR PRESENT"**

Jesus was telling Sam, "Follow me, and I can't promise you where we'll sleep or what we'll eat, but it will be exciting. Just trust me." Now when some people say, "just trust me..." don't! But when Jesus says it, you can trust Him.

Consider the kind of life Jesus lived. Compared to most people, He lived in poverty. He didn't own a home or rent a tent. He was basically what we call a homeless person today. He was so poor He had to look in a fish's mouth for His tax payment. When he wanted to teach a lesson about rendering to Caesar, He had to borrow a coin. When He died His only possessions were the clothes He wore. He was so poor He had to be buried in a borrowed tomb but that was okay because He didn't need it for very long! In fact the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich."

Jesus was poor, yet we never read where Jesus missed a meal or was forced to sleep on a rock. Instead, wherever He traveled there were always people who opened their homes, and invited Him to share a meal. Most of us are planners. We want to know what we're having for lunch and dinner today and we want to know where we're staying and what we're eating tomorrow.

But Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us THIS DAY our daily bread." He didn't teach us to say, "Give us tomorrow's bread." The Manna of the Old Testament is a great illustration of how we should trust God every single day. The Israelites could only gather enough manna for one day. If they tried to hoard it for tomorrow, the manna would become sour and inedible.

Jesus made it clear that we are to trust Him for our needs instead of worrying about them. He said, "If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds." (Matthew 6:25-26 *The Message*). Are you trusting God for your needs today?

## II. THE PARABLE OF BURYING THE DEAD

We'll call the second wannabe disciple Joseph. Joe came to Jesus expressing his desire to be a disciple, but he just wasn't ready to follow Jesus NOW. First he wanted to go home and bury his father. Jesus' response has often been misunderstood. He said, "Follow me. Let the dead bury the dead."

### A. MISAPPLICATION: Jesus isn't saying we should ignore our family in times of crisis

Jesus wasn't being unkind. Don't get the impression that Joe's dad had just died and Jesus was discouraging him from going home for the funeral. In fact, in Jewish culture, because there was no embalming, a corpse had to be buried within 24 hours of death, so there was very little waiting involved. The phrase "bury my father" was a common way of saying, "I must go home and WAIT until my father dies because WHEN he finally dies, it's my duty to bury him." Also, Jesus didn't mean let corpses bury corpses; that sounds like the plot of a modern horror movie. Jesus engaged in wordplay. He literally said, "Let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead, but I have a message of LIFE for the thousands who are spiritually dead."

### B. PERSONAL APPLICATION: When Jesus calls I shouldn't hesitate or procrastinate

If you aren't passionately following Jesus right now, what are you waiting for? Are you hesitating? When Jesus called someone to follow He never said, "Follow me tomorrow. It was always, "Follow me NOW." He never said, "I'm going to sing fourteen verses of a song while you decide." He told Peter and John to leave their nets, and they left the fish flopping in the boats.

Are you hesitating? Are you procrastinating? I was going to talk to you about procrastination today, but I've decided to wait until next week to do it. Are you a procrastinator? Do you hesitate when Jesus calls you? Steven Ricci is a columnist and he makes the following confession: "I am a procrastinator: I am one of those people who will do virtually anything, no matter how trivial in order to avoid doing the thing I am supposed to be doing, unless of course the thing I'm doing to avoid doing the thing I should be doing becomes the thing I should be doing, in which case I immediately stop doing what I am doing and begin doing something else. Either way, nothing gets done."

What's your excuse today? Joe was saying, "I would follow you BUT I've got to go bury my father." In my former church I remember hearing a sweet lady teaching a devotion to a group of ladies where I was the guest. She was a prim and proper librarian who loved words. She taught an entire lesson on the word "but." She explained that the word "but" is a powerful negative contraction that usually cancels out whatever you say before it. She gave examples of people who say, "I would tithe, BUT I can't pay my bills" or "I would serve in my church, BUT I have to be gone several weeks a year." or "I would be at church this Sunday BUT I have company coming." She talked about people who say, "I WOULD serve the Lord But ..... But ..... But ..... But." She really got fired up, and all the other ladies were nodding in agreement. At that moment she got carried away and turned to me and said, "Pastor, I just wish we could kick all the 'buts' out of our church..." There was a moment of stunned silence, as she realized what she had just

said. After a few seconds, I said, "Yes, ma'am. I agree. You take names and I'll kick butts!" At that moment, everyone started laughing and we couldn't quit! BUT she sure got her point across! My friend David Ring has Cerebral Palsy, but even with his handicap he has preached to millions of people. He is famous for saying, "I have Cerebral Palsy. What's YOUR excuse?"

### **C. GOD'S MESSAGE: "TRUST ME WITH YOUR FUTURE"**

Jesus told Sam to trust Him for the present and He told Joe to trust Him with His future. Joe already had his plans laid out, and Jesus told him to drop his plans and follow him. Most of us want to make our own plans and Jesus says we should surrender our plans to His and trust Him with our future.

Matthew doesn't include it, but in Luke's account of this conversation Jesus adds another word to this conversation. "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62) He was saying, "Don't live in the past. Keep your eyes on following me into the future."

Regardless of your age, are you willing to follow Jesus more faithfully *now* than ever before? There may be some of you who are at an age when you think the best of your life is behind you. Every car needs a rearview mirror, but if driver constantly looking in the mirror then you are an accident waiting to happen. Some people live life the same way: They look in the mirror of their memories and talk about the good old days. And you can only see a tiny sliver in your rearview mirror, while God has a windshield full of blessings in front of you. The past is a great place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there. The wonderful thing about following Jesus is that the best is always ahead.

So instead of worrying about the future, trust God with your future. Jesus said it this way, "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." (Matthew 6:31-34)

### **CONCLUSION**

Have you noticed how the cost of things keeps changing? In 1950 the average price of a new home was \$8,400 and today the average price of a new home is 32 times that at \$270,000. In 1950 the average cost of a new car was \$1,500 and today it is 19 times that at \$26,500. Gas was 18 cents a gallon and today it is 14 times that much at \$2.59 a gallon (but it was \$3.68 a gallon a year ago). In 1950 you could buy a gallon of milk for 84 cents and today it's only 4 times that much at \$3.50 a gallon. The average household income in 1950 was \$3,200 and today it's 15 times that at \$50,000. We all know the cost of goods and services keeps changing. But you can be certain that the COST of following Jesus hasn't changed in 2,000 years. It still costs everything you are. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up the cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23) During the Jesus' time, when you saw a man

carrying a cross, you knew it meant one thing—he was on his way to die. In the same way we must be willing to die to self and live a life of obedience and devotion to Jesus.

Perhaps you've heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. I heard someone say once that "a literary classic is a book that everyone talks about but nobody reads." But the title really makes sense when you learn the story of Bonhoeffer's life and death.

Bonhoeffer was a young pastor in Germany during the 1930s as Hitler's popularity was growing. He was a pacifist and refused to get involved with the political scene. But in the early 1940s when Bonhoeffer and other pastors began to learn about how the Jews were being rounded up and slaughtered, he realized he could no longer remain silent. As a follower of Jesus he couldn't stand by while these atrocities were being carried out by the Fuhrer. So, Bonhoeffer joined the underground German resistance and was part of a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. He and the other conspirators were discovered and arrested and thrown into a Nazi prison. While in prison, Bonhoeffer served as a pastor to the other prisoners and taught God's Word every day. He wrote a number of letters from the prison that have since been published. These show that his faith only grew during this time of suffering. As the allied forces moved toward Berlin, Hitler demanded a death sentence for those who had plotted his death. So at dawn on April 9, 1945, just three weeks before Berlin fell to the allies, Bonhoeffer was executed. According to an eyewitness his death was brutal. He was stripped of his clothing and led naked into the execution yard, where he was hanged.

The prison doctor who witnessed Bonhoeffer's death later described the scene: "I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer kneeling on the ground praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of hanging he again knelt and said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."

The cost of following Jesus hasn't changed. It doesn't mean that we will have to die for Jesus, but it means that we have to die to self to follow Him.

Let's go back to our two wannabe disciples for a moment. Sam was over-enthusiastic and Jesus told him the cost of discipleship meant leaving his comfort zone. Joe was overly-cautious and Jesus told him to stop worrying about the future and risk the excitement of a life of faith. So, what did they do? Did Sam follow Jesus, or did he go back to his soft bed? Did Joe follow Jesus or did he go back home and wait for his dear old dad to die? We don't know and it really doesn't matter, because the point of this message isn't whether *they* decided to follow Jesus, it's whether or not you and I will follow Jesus. These two guys are no longer around, and neither is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but we are. The same Lord that spoke to them is speaking to us today and He's saying the same thing: "Follow me." Are you willing to leave your comfort zone? Will you step out in faith and trust God day by day? Are you willing to stop procrastinating and give Jesus your all today and trust Him for your future?

He may be saying to you, "Follow me into church membership" or "Follow me into this ministry" or "Follow me into this area of sacrifice."

What do you think you could BE if you stopped holding back anything from Jesus? What would your life look like if you truly gave Jesus everything and let go of every hesitation and fear?

There's a great song by Chris Tomlin that describes a life of following Jesus with no limitations. He sings, "I want to live like there's no tomorrow; I want to dance like no one's around; I want to sing like nobody's listening; before I lay my body down. I want to give like I have plenty; I want to love like I'm not afraid; I want to be the man I was meant to be; I want to be the way I was made." What are you waiting for?

Our church doesn't need more members, we've got plenty. We don't even need more believers, we have plenty of those. What we really need are some real disciples, and some disciple-makers. Will you be one?

## OUTLINE

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- A. Misapplication: Jesus isn't saying we must adopt a life of poverty
- B. Personal Application: When Jesus calls I must be willing to leave my comfort zone
- C. God's Message: "Trust me with your present"

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes