

UNO OR MONOPOLY?

7th in a Series Titled, “What Did He Say?” on Difficult Sayings of Jesus
Matthew 8:18-22 – Topic: Following Jesus

In 2010, Jeff Miller, age 26, won the title of Ultimate Couch Potato at Chicago’s ESPN Zone restaurant for the third time. In so doing he established a new Guinness World Record for nonstop TV viewing. He watched 72 straight hours of sports programming. Obviously this was at a time when no one could even have imagined the sports famine we are currently enduring. The rules were that contestants were not allowed to sleep, and they had to stay in their chair except for scheduled bathroom breaks and hourly 5 minute stretches. For his efforts, Miller was rewarded a new recliner, a \$1000 gift card toward a new TV, money to pay his cable TV bills for one year, \$1000 in ESPN Zone credit and the Ultimate Couch Potato trophy. Brian Hanover of ESPN said, “Most people have no idea what it takes to win. They don’t understand the endurance it takes to stay awake and control bodily issues. Jeff is uniquely qualified. He’s an expert.”

Well, it’s good to be an expert at something I guess. I think Laurie believes that this is something her husband could seriously compete in. During football season especially he shows remarkable couch potato ability. Right now since we’re all under house arrest and confined to quarters, if there were some real sports to watch on television I would be happy to challenge Miller’s record. But as I say that I realize that I find the prospect of that endeavor unappealing. Even I, as pathetic as I am when it comes to watching sports on TV, know there surely is more to life than that. I don’t want to spend my life watching other people live and participate while I do nothing.

Don’t you want a life of freedom, adventure, and meaning? I think we all do. We want to be far more than a potato, whether couch or any other kind. But modern society doesn’t offer much adventure for the average person, so how can we live fully alive? Today I am going to return to a series of sermons I was doing before our lives were so rudely interrupted. It’s time for us to take some small steps toward a more normal life, so my first step will be resuming these sermons on some of the puzzling things that Jesus occasionally said. Today we will look at an incident from the life of Jesus that speaks to where that life is found. Let’s look at 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 dens and birds 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.’”

A VOLUNTEER HAD BIG GOALS

These events happened at a time when Jesus' ministry was on the upswing. The first verse in Chapter 8 says, "When Jesus came down from the mountainside large crowds followed him." The mountainside he came down from was the one alluded to in the title, "Sermon on The Mount." Jesus had just delivered that awesome talk and had blown people away. Jesus had thoroughly shredded the theology and lifestyles of the elites of that ancient society and had told the common people that the Kingdom of God actually would belong to humble people like them.

This created a lot of enthusiasm. So as we see, "large crowds" were following Jesus. In the following verses Jesus healed a number of people. How do you suppose healing sick people right and left affected his popularity? It was soaring! Jesus taught with power and insight that they had never experienced, but he also manifested power over nature. They had never seen anything like that.

At this point a man called a "teacher of the law," literally a scribe, said to Jesus, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." This man was likely a fairly young man who was already educated and on his way up in society. The educational system back then was different than it is today. An up-and-coming rabbi wannabe didn't go to the University of Jerusalem and earn a Ph. D. He would find a respected rabbi to study under. He would glean all the knowledge he could from his teacher and adopt his ideas and philosophies. The goal was to gain enough expertise and develop a reputation to the point where they could launch off on their own. A disciple would hope to become so well known that would-be disciples would seek him out.

This man, already known as a teacher of the law, already educated and respected, has heard things from Jesus that he had heard from no one else. He is proposing that he become a disciple of Jesus. I am sure he was inspired by the revolutionary teaching he heard from Jesus. But looking at the crowds around Jesus he was no doubt also thinking this was a good career move. He was thinking being a Jesus disciple was better than a doctorate from Harvard in terms of career enhancement.

Being a respected rabbi in ancient Israel was highly desirable. Such rabbis were greatly admired and much in demand. Remember that there were no entertainment celebrities. There were no famous athletes. The political leaders at that time were either Romans or Roman-appointed lackeys. The people with the most influence were the religious leaders.

We can't say that this man's motivations were only mercenary. As I said, I have no doubt that he was excited about the teaching he heard from Jesus. But he was part of a system. He was planning on staying in that system. He thought that Jesus was a new rock star in this system, and he was going to hitch a ride with him, which would set him up for great success in the future in the system.

Normally we would think Jesus would be thrilled to have this man ask to become a disciple. The people who were following Jesus for the most part were the common people, the blue collar folk of that society. They were fishermen and tradespeople. They were of no account in the estimation of the influential people in society. Along comes this guy who is a fast riser, a respectable man destined for big things. He would significantly raise Jesus' profile with the powers that be.

Jesus' response to this man is surprising. "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Doesn't this sound like an "Ah, Grasshopper" kind of saying? It sounds like a sort of obscure eastern saying that you have to ponder for years to begin to get its true implications.

What was Jesus saying? Jesus was not whining because he was homeless. He was telling this guy to take a good hard look at his life. Even animals have places to make their home. But Jesus didn't. He didn't even have a room at Motel 6. In other words, Jesus did not fit in the system this guy lived in. He was not trying to gain a big following so he could be a respected authority. He wasn't looking to climb the ladder of success and status and garner all the trappings that come with it. He was operating totally outside that system.

Jesus didn't say either yes or no to this guy. I think he was seeking to break him out of the system that he had been a part of all of his life. This has been recorded for us because he wants to do the same thing to us. He wants to break us out of the system we have lived in, a system that has controlled our thinking for our entire lives. He wants us to have a totally new way of thinking and operating, a whole new system altogether.

He is warning us this new system is not about any of the things that the system we have lived in are about. It has nothing to do with comfort, riches, possessions, status, success, acclaim, popularity. In fact, this system travels down a road that is not wide, smooth and easy. It likely will be bumpy, narrow and often difficult. It surely was all of that for Jesus, and much more.

We don't know what happened to that man. As far as we know, he's never mentioned again in the Bible. If I had to bet on the outcome, I'd guess that he fell away. As it became increasingly obvious that Jesus was being rejected by the establishment in Israel, as it became more apparent that following him was dangerous, I suspect this man began looking for a safer and more promising mentor to follow. But we will never know. This story is recorded as a challenge to us and our participation in and dedication to the system that controls our lives.

A VOLUNTEER HAD FAMILY COMMITMENTS

After that encounter, another volunteer expressed his desire to follow Jesus. But this guy had one caveat. The only thing in the way has nothing to do with his desire and willingness to follow Jesus. He says, “First let me go and bury my father.”

Jesus’ response to Number 2 is almost rude. “Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead.” Well that’s not real sensitive. Sheesh. This poor guy’s dad died and all you’ve got is “let the dead bury their own dead.” Even the most hard-nosed people in our society make allowances for those who lose a loved one. This comes off as totally lacking in even rudimentary kindness. What’s going on here? Why did Jesus say this?

To understand that, we need to think about ancient burial customs. Think about what happened when Jesus was executed. What time did he die? The Bible says it was about the 9th hour, which was 3 PM. They had his body wrapped and in a tomb before sunset. Why was he buried so quickly? They had his body in a tomb in less than 3 or 4 hours. That’s because ancient Israelis didn’t embalm the deceased. They just buried them as quickly as possible. In a relatively warm climate like that of Palestine, dead bodies began to reek very quickly. So they buried the dead immediately.

What does that tell you? It tells you this volunteer’s father had not died. *If he had died, the man would not have been there listening to Jesus speak.* He would have been helping with the funeral and burying his father that day. He would have been home with his family.

This guy’s dad was very much alive and probably not even sick. “Bury my father” was likely a colloquialism for fulfilling family expectations. It meant help in the family business until Dad, the patriarch of the family, went to his reward. Dad likely would have expected his sons to help in the family enterprise. Once Dad had passed off the scene the man could feel free to leave the business in the hands of other family members, perhaps his brothers. But for now, he had to honor his father, follow his wishes, and put off following Jesus.

You can understand the challenge facing this man. Following Jesus was a radical thing to do. I envision his dad saying, “You want to leave the family, leave our business, to walk around listening to some wood worker from Nazareth, of all places? What are you thinking? How are you going to support yourself? Is this guy going to pay you? No, I didn’t think so. This is just foolish. And you’re abandoning your family!” I credit this man with a commendable commitment to his family. But his comment that he wanted to bury his father was awfully open ended. It ends up being a promise to follow Jesus “some day.” I’m pretty sure Jesus knew that “some day” would never come.

So Jesus' challenge to the man was to let the spiritually dead, meaning the other members of his family who had not seen the light, not found life in Jesus, bury his father, which meant carry on the family business until dad did actually die. I have no doubt that if the man's father actually became critically ill, Jesus would have sent him home to be there for his dad and the family. But that day might well be years off in the future. And Jesus knew that his ministry would be completed long before that day. There was an element of urgency in following Jesus because he wasn't going to be around for decades. So Jesus was saying, "Following me is more important than appeasing your family, even your dad. It is, in fact, the most important thing you can do."

What this man wanted to do was not a bad thing. It was a good thing. The problem was, it was not the most important thing. Our son, Toby, recently did a rotation in a hospital at Lake Tahoe. He spent some of his time in the ER and some at a clinic where they brought broken skiers. He dealt with a lot of damaged limbs along with the usual parade of cases that show up in an ER. At one point at the clinic they brought in a man who was having a cardiac event. Suppose this man also had an injured knee, maybe even a torn ACL. Toby would have had to triage the man. What is most important to do? He had to save the man's life. He had to do what was necessary to keep the man from dying and stabilize him. A damaged knee is important and it needs to be fixed. But the heart has to be dealt with first. It takes priority. Respecting the family is certainly a good thing, but following Jesus was the priority.

IMPLICATIONS

THE NATURAL CURRENT OF LIFE WILL LEAD US TO COMPROMISE

In these two cases we see this show up in two forms. The first man was influenced by his culture and the appeal of success. His thinking was informed by how the system worked. The second man was an example of the pull of family, and maybe even friends, on us.

Both of these men could make a biblical argument that they were proposing to do what God would want them to do. The first guy wanted to be a Jesus disciple so he could learn from him and then eventually be a rabbi to others whom he would then, by extension, turn into disciples of Jesus. Isn't that exactly what Jesus wants us to do? In Matthew 28:19, Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations." Isn't that what the first guy wanted to do? And the second guy was trying to honor his father. That was a direct command from God, one of the Big Ten. Exodus 20:12 is the fifth commandment. "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you."

These two cases point out to us that it is extremely easy to find a way to compromise when it comes to following Jesus, and even to find a way to make our compromise seem like we're obeying God. Yes, the first guy wanted to make disciples, but there was an element of doing it to be a success. The second man wanted to negotiate with Jesus so he could make his family happy.

There are forces that are going to exert powerful influences on us. The world system around us will pressure us continually and even the pressure of family and friends will sway us. It is powerfully tempting to just go with the flow, to find a way to fit our faith into the systems of this world so that it is more comfortable.

When I was in college, I had a good friend named Pat, who was an all-in kind of guy. He didn't do anything half way. He was a follower of Jesus, and he was dedicated in his faith. He was a year behind me in school, so I graduated a year before him. I went to work in a ministry to college students and was very busy. We would connect from time to time, just to keep in touch. Pat got married to a wonderful Christian gal and went to work in his dad's business. Maybe three years or so after I graduated I got a letter from Pat. It's been a long time but I still remember one line from that letter. He said, "I can't believe what has happened to me." It was nothing dramatic, nothing terrible or even obvious. He said that he had realized that his life had become about making more money, growing the business, succeeding, and that it was consuming him. He said that those desires had pushed his passion for the Lord to the side. He talked about the zeal he had when we were in college and was dismayed to see how most of that had disappeared. He hadn't done anything wrong or evil. He was just working. He was doing what a man is supposed to do. But he woke up to the fact that *slowly, without him being aware of it, the environment of business had deadened his soul*. Pat would eventually leave the family business, go to seminary and become a pastor, serving the Lord in that role until a couple of years ago.

This doesn't mean you have to be a pastor or a missionary to obey Jesus. What I want you to glean from Pat's story is the subtle influence of the world around us that can somehow take over first place in our hearts and deaden our passion for Jesus.

When Paul wrote 2 Timothy, he was once again in prison, and this time he would not leave. He would be executed, and he knew this was coming. He had sent some of his allies to minister to believers in other places. Only Luke was with him. 2 Timothy 4:10 says, "Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica." Demas was one of Paul's solid fellow soldiers. He was mentioned in both Colossians and Philemon. But the world exerted a pull on him, like it does on all of us. He could see how things were heading with Paul, and it had just gotten too scary, too hard for Demas. He bailed out because he wanted to be safe and he couldn't do that with Paul. He didn't stop believing in Jesus. He just compromised and took the safe way out.

James 4:4 says, "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy to God." Does that mean we're not supposed to have friends in the world? Are we supposed to remove all contact with the world? No, that's not the point. James was talking about what's in our heart. Are we being swayed to pursue what the world values? Are we thinking like

the world around us? Are we buying into the world's system and its priorities, and trying to make our faith in Jesus sort of fit in with that system?

In Luke 16:15 Jesus said to the Pharisees, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight.” What a thunderous comment that is. Frankly, most people then thought the Pharisees were the most spiritual people on the planet. They were the closest to God. If they were around today, I daresay most Christians would think the same thing. But God saw what was in their hearts. It wasn't following and serving him. It was the same stuff the world pursues: approval, acclaim, money, power and status. Listen to what Jesus said about that stuff. “What people value highly is detestable in God's sight.”

When I started out in ministry I had a deep desire to serve God and to impact people for his kingdom. But being human there were some mixed motives in there. Undoubtedly there still are. My heroes as I launched into ministry were great pastors of mega churches. Down in those secret places of my heart there was that desire to have “success” in ministry like them. I don't recall consciously thinking that, but *I would learn that it was there*. I went to monthly pastors' meetings where I felt this subtle competition to be the one whose ministry was flourishing the most. It was the same thing that caused Jesus' disciples to repeatedly argue about which of them was the greatest. I had a couple of encounters with other pastors that revealed that desire in them as well. I saw some pretty ugly things people did to pursue that desire. It shocked me, but it also made me aware of the danger lurking in my own heart. What people value highly is detestable to God. He genuinely hates what our world seeks.

The world is trying to pull us into its system, and what we need most is to not compromise with it, but to see it as something God doesn't just put up with, he hates it. He detests it. It makes him ill. So we need to have nothing to do with it. Which leads to the next point.

JESUS CALLS US TO A RELENTLESS, COUNTER-CULTURAL DEDICATION TO HIM
Jesus' responses to both of these men indicated that he superseded both the demands of the systems of this world, and the demands of family commitments. In fact, in Luke 14:26 Jesus made an astounding statement. “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple.”

Wait, what kind of religion is this? Jesus said in John 13:34-35 that the way people would know we are his followers is that we love one another. And in that verse, Jesus said we have to hate our parents, our spouse, our children, our siblings, even our own life? A while back, Laurie and I were taking care of our granddaughters. At one point, Ella mentioned there was one particular

food she really did not like to eat. I can't remember what it was, but I do recall that I responded by saying, "Yeah, me too. I hate that stuff." Ella said, "No, Yapaw, we don't hate."

I repented. But then Jesus tells me to hate people I'm supposed to love? This is one of those places where we say, "Yikes, Jesus, why did you say that? It's hard to understand." In Ephesians 5:25 Paul said that husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the church, but here Jesus said his followers have to hate their wives. This must be one of those famous contradictions in the Bible, right?

We need to go back to the ancient Hebrew idea of hate. In English, hate speaks of hostility, intense dislike, animosity. At times the ancient Hebrews used it that way, but they also had another sense for the word. The word had a sense of turning away from. Genesis 29:31 says, "When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless." Unfortunately the NIV translators didn't help us there. The Hebrew says, "When the Lord saw that Leah was hated..."

Jacob had two wives, Leah and Rachel. He didn't hate Leah in the sense of despising her, being hostile toward her. His "hate" just meant that he consistently preferred Rachel and put her first. He clearly wasn't despising Leah in the sense of having nothing to do with her, because she got pregnant with his child. That wasn't a miracle. It happened the way wives have always gotten pregnant, so obviously Jacob was not shunning her.

In Malachi 1:2-3, later quoted in Romans 9:13, the Lord said, "Was not Esau Jacob's brother? Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated." He didn't hate Esau in the sense of saying, "I can't stand that guy. I want to vaporize him." He "hated" him in the colloquial sense of not choosing him, even though he was the first born and thus the expected choice.

So back to Jesus' statement in Luke 14:26 when he said we are to hate parents, spouses and the rest, he didn't mean we are to despise them, be hostile toward them, treat them badly. He meant that we are not to choose them over following Jesus. Yes, by all means, love and honor parents, love your wife as Christ loved the church, but love Jesus more. Choose him first of all.

I had a friend who was Jewish. He was from a very Jewish family. But he felt a void in his life. He began searching. He went so far as to look into Jesus, and he became convinced that Jesus was, in fact, the long promised Messiah. He became a follower of Jesus. This was not well received by his family. It led to rejection and estrangement that lasted for a long time. In terms of the ancient Hebrews, he hated his family. The truth was that he never stopped loving his family, and the estrangement from them was a great grief to him. He longed for, and never stopped seeking, close relationships with them. But he did not compromise his faith in Jesus. Eventually the wall between them began to break down, but it took a long time.

The point here is not that everybody who responds to Jesus' call needs to leave everything and everyone and go be a missionary, or at least a pastor. The point is that Jesus wants us to care about following him more than anything else in this world...more than money, more than acceptance into a group, more than applause, more than comfort, more than success, more even than family or friends. He wants us to follow him with passion and undiluted commitment.

Mark Schlereth is a former NFL football player who now is an analyst for Fox Sports. On one show he was asked about how remarkable Tom Brady is. He said the most amazing thing is how passionate and committed Brady is. He says, "He wakes up, and it's all about what am I going to do today to be the best quarterback I can be for this organization." Despite his success, Schlereth says of Brady, "He still eats that grind for breakfast, lunch and dinner. It's one of the most amazing things I've ever witnessed." Here is what Brady himself says. "If you want to beat me you better be ready to lose your life, because I've already given up mine."

Brady has shown that kind of dedication day after day, week after week, year after year for 20 years, all to win football games. That is the kind of dedication Jesus asks of us: dedication to something way bigger than football.

One might think this is a life that is no fun at all, just hard, exhausting and long. But the surprising truth is that this is what we were created for. We were made to live passionately, to expend ourselves and everything within us in the quest for a great cause, the cause of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. Real life actually comes from having and pursuing that cause.

There is a man named Steve Feltham who had a cause. He quit his job, sold his house and left his girlfriend in order to, in his words, "pursue his passion." He bought a van to live in and moved to Loch Ness in Scotland. There, living in his van, he kept watch over that lake every day, looking for a glimpse of the legendary Loch Ness monster. He did that for a quarter of a century! After 25 years he finally gave up in 2015, admitting there is no monster, that maybe there's just a very big catfish in the lake.

When I first encountered that story I thought, "What an idiotic waste of a life. You give up everything to live in a van looking for a glimpse of a myth? How stupid can you be?" But listen to what he said about his life. While he was still watching he said, "The reason I sit here and I try to solve this mystery is because that is what makes my heart sing. My life gives me freedom, adventure, unpredictability...it's a dream come true."

Where did the freedom, the adventure, the unpredictability, come from? It didn't come from pursuing a myth. It came from his dedication to a cause. Even if the cause was ludicrous, that kind of dedication is in fact the adventure, the dream come true. Imagine the adventure, the

freedom, the life if he had dedicated himself to something that is real, something that is infinitely significant. This is the life Jesus calls us to.

I am at a point in my life where I don't get to do some of the things I have most enjoyed. I loved sports. I played on teams at various points in baseball, football, basketball, rugby and hockey. But I was thinking recently about that and wondered why I liked playing those sports. The truth is I was never good enough in any of them to actually get lots of joy and excitement out of just playing the sport. I realized there were two big things that drew me to those activities. One was that I loved being part of a team. The other was that I loved competition that meant something. I loved being on teams and vying for a championship. Just playing for the sake of playing wasn't nearly as fun. In other words, I loved playing the game when it meant something, even if that something was trivial, like the championship of a nameless rec league. It occurred to me that life is kind of like that. Until you are going all out for something that actually has real meaning, you're not really in the game, and life will never be the adventure we all want it to be.

In his book *Crazy Love*, Francis Chan wrote, "We all know something is wrong... I stood before 20,000 Christian college students and asked, 'how many of you have read the New Testament and wondered if we in the church are missing it?' Almost every hand went up." Inside we know, we want more, something real and powerful. *We want to do what Jesus asked, and that is to break out of the prison of the system of this world and radically follow him.*

In his book, *Giving It All Away*, David Green says we tend to think life is like a Monopoly game, where the point is to accumulate all that you can, and in so doing, beat everyone else. Now, I know life isn't like Monopoly, because those games go on forever, and I am becoming painfully aware that life does not. However, Green goes on to say life is not like Monopoly, it is more like Uno, where you win when you've gotten rid of all your cards. He says, "Don't get stuck at the time of your funeral with leftover cards."

I want to challenge you today to renew your commitment to follow Jesus with passion and without reservation. Hold nothing back. Tell him you want to put aside everything and follow him. Ask him to show you what you might be holding back from him, how you might be hanging on to the world. Then go through your life and say, "Jesus, this is not mine, it's yours. This is your house, these are your investments, this is your money, this is your car, these are your clothes, this is your family, this is your job, this is your body, this is your tongue, this is your mind. I'm giving it all. You do with it whatever you think best."