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[All Scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.]

### Matthew 18:18-22 Tag-Along or Follower?

According to Matthew, when the Sermon on the Mount was finished, Jesus continued to do what he had been doing before: healing people, demonstrating the kingdom of God that he proclaimed and taught. Jesus came down from the mountainside and healed a leper. The crowds trailed after him. He entered the city of Capernaum and healed a servant of a Roman centurion. The crowds trailed after him. He came to Peter's house and healed Peter's mother-in-law. The crowds kept coming.

Word continued to spread. People continued to come, and Jesus continued to heal. Matthew 8:16 says, "When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick."

Verse 18 says this: "When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake." When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he made plans to leave. He was not planning to walk down the road to the next town. He was planning to take a boat to the other side of the lake. He was intentionally making it difficult for the crowds to trail after him.

Jesus would do this again and again during his ministry. His announcement of the kingdom of God would intrigue people. His teaching about the kingdom of God would engage people. His demonstrations of the kingdom of God would amaze people, and the crowds would gather. Then, just when it seemed that the crowds were more intrigued and most engaged and most responsive, Jesus would leave.

Jesus was more interested in gathering disciples than gathering crowds. Jesus wanted people who would give their allegiance to him and give up everything in order to be with him and to learn from him how to be like him. There were tag-alongs who were intrigued by him and who desired the excitement of the miraculous. Jesus never turned away a tag-along, but he was seeking followers.

As Jesus made ready to cross the lake, he did not send anybody away. All who would follow were invited. However, Jesus made clear that following him required being more interested in Jesus' mission than the status quo. He also made clear that following him required shifting all loyalty to him.

That is what faith is all about. Faith is not just giving cognitive assent to who Jesus is and what he has done. Faith involves giving allegiance to Jesus. Faith involves setting aside every other loyalty. Faith involves setting every other obligation under the obligation to follow Jesus and setting every other desire under the desire to be with Jesus.

Matthew 8:18 says, "A teacher of the law came to Jesus and said, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.'" In other words, I want to be your disciple. Here's a man who has studied Scripture. He has heard Jesus proclaim the kingdom and teach the kingdom. He has seen Jesus demonstrate the kingdom. He probably does not yet recognize that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah (nobody did yet), but he does

recognize that Jesus is a wise teacher, a man who knows the ways of God and can teach others to live the ways of God. He wants to be Jesus disciple. He wants to give his allegiance to Jesus and learn from Jesus because he is convinced that Jesus knows how to live a life that honors God and demonstrates God's goodness. (It is worth noticing that, though the crowds were filled with the poor, the sick, and the desperate, Jesus also drew interest from those who were educated and respected. "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.")

Matthew 8:20...Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." In other words, follow me if you will, but do not think that it is going to be comfortable. I will take you places you have not been. That which you thought was settled, I will unsettle. [There's a word here for those who would teach that God's primary interest is in rewarding the righteous with health, wealth, and happiness!] You are invited, but you need to know what you are getting yourself into.

Jesus would do this again and again and again during his ministry. He was a master of truth in advertising. He invited people to follow him, but he also reminded people to count the cost.

A true accounting of the costs always reveals that the cost of following Jesus is far less than the cost of not following Jesus. But sometimes people are looking for a lord of their own design, someone who can be molded according to their desires instead of the living Lord who molds us according to what is truly good, someone who will follow them rather than require them to follow him. These people will likely find that the cost of following Jesus is higher than they planned and the result is not what they were looking for.

Matthew 8:21...Another disciple came to Jesus, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Matthew does not give us this disciple's name. Jesus has not yet called all of Twelve. I do not know if this disciple was one of the Twelve or one of the larger group of men and women who gave their allegiance to Jesus and traveled with him in order to learn from him. In any case, it seems that as long as Jesus stayed around Capernaum, this disciple was able to stay close to Jesus and also take care of his responsibilities at home. Now that Jesus was leaving the area, this disciple was torn between competing loyalties. He had responsibilities to family, so he essentially told Jesus that he would catch up with him later. Allegiance to what he already has prioritized is competing with allegiance to Jesus, which demands a re-ordering of priorities.

Matthew 8:22...Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." Jesus knew that his ministry would be short. This person could travel with him now or not travel with him at all. There was no room for competing loyalties, even seemingly good ones.

Jesus would do this again and again and again during his ministry. Jesus was never looking to be Lord of a part of a person's life--when there was extra time, when it was convenient, when it fit in with pre-existing values and priorities.

To accept Jesus as Lord is to acknowledge that he reigns over everything. He calls us to follow in every part of our lives. He calls us to re-evaluate our values and re-order our priorities. He calls us to set every other allegiance under our allegiance to

him, every other obligation under our obligation to him, every other desire under our desire for him.

Jesus got in the boat to cross the lake. His disciples followed him. Those in the crowd who were there for other reasons, who were not ready to be unsettled and re-directed, who were not ready to set aside every allegiance, obligation, and desire other than Jesus, did not follow.

Jesus did not send anybody away. Those who tagged along after Jesus were invited to become those who belonged to Jesus. Some did. Many went home.

Isn't it interesting that Matthew does not tell us how either man responded? Did the teacher of the law decide that comfort was not his goal and follow Jesus? Did the disciple who wanted stay back and follow later decide that now was the time?

The same questions face you and me every day. Are we willing to set aside comfort and follow Jesus wherever he leads us? Do we give Jesus that part of our time, attention, and energy that is not otherwise engaged or are we all in? Are we willing to have our values challenged and our priorities re-ordered? Are we willing to set aside all competing allegiances, to place all other loyalties and loves under our loyalty to Jesus and our love for Jesus? Are we willing to care responsibly for all those Jesus calls us to care for, and are we equally willing to trust our loved ones to Jesus when he calls us to follow him in another direction?

Jesus is more interested in gathering disciples than crowds. If we follow him, he will not lead us to silence in the face of injustice, and he will challenge our pre-conceived and self-centered agendas and desires. If we follow him, he will not lead us to hide from the truth about this world's brokenness and our own complicity in it, and he will challenge us to reach beyond what is easy and comfortable. If we follow him, he will lead us to life, and he will conform us to himself.

Thanks be to God.