

**Key idea:** Jesus has the authority to define what it means to follow him.

## 1. Following Jesus

Jesus has the authority to teach. Jesus has the authority to heal – the authority to deal with the whole package of sin and the brokenness it brings. But how far does this authority of Jesus reach? Does Jesus have the authority to define what it means to follow him?

It is an important question because it affects people like us, people who call ourselves followers of Jesus. It affects people like us because we like Jesus' authoritative teaching – his wise take on life, his insightful skewering of the proud and the religious, the self-righteous and the pompous. It affects people like us because we love the way in which Jesus' authority in action deals with the downtrodden, the outcast, the sick and the broken. We love Jesus as Teacher, as Saviour – but do we accept Jesus as Lord? Does Jesus have the authority to tell us what it means to follow him, what it looks like to follow him?

PRAY...

## 2. Jesus has authority

Matthew has written this biography so that we meet Jesus as he truly is.

First, Jesus fulfils God's promise to deal with the broken state of the world – to deal with sin – through the family of Abraham.

Jesus is the king God promised would restore all things to blessing, from curse.

Second, as Jesus deals with sin, he is about bringing in God's kingdom. He is focused on bringing sinners – which is all humans because all humans have the attitude and action that says, 'I am God and God is not' – back to God.

Third, for those who are from Abraham's family – the nation of Israel – this is the moment that they had always waited for. For those outside Israel – people like us – this is the moment when they see that God is committed to dealing with all sin, for people from all nations.

Fourth, as Matthew portrays Jesus, he makes sure we know him as the man with authority. He has authority as a teacher, someone who speaks clearly of, from and about God's word. He has authority as a healer and miracle worker, someone who exercises authority in his daily life as he sets the world aright as part of his ultimate work of dealing with human sin.

### **3. Jesus has authority**

#### **(i) The scene (vs.18)**

Wherever he goes, Jesus attracts a large crowd. As he taught his closest followers on the mountain (Matthew 5-7), a large crowd gathered, and was amazed at his teaching. As he descended the mountain and moved to his base of Capernaum, a large crowd follows (vs.1, 16). And, as he continues his work, he sees a large crowd gathering around himself – **look at verse 18... READ.**

The large crowd is a constant source of temptation and distraction for Jesus. At numerous points across all four Gospels, Jesus dismisses the crowd, or escapes the crowd and retreats into the wilderness (often to pray). His amazing authority – as a teacher and worker of healing – would have galvanized Jewish hopes and expectations and false dreams. For a nation oppressed and dispossessed, with promises from God that seem distant, it would not have taken much to raise nationalistic fervour, and it would take much to dampen and dispel it. Moreover, just as he was at the start of his public ministry, Jesus would have been tempted to express his identity in alternative ways that would not have accorded with God's plans and promises.

So, he gives the order – did you see that there in verse 18? – 'to go' over to another region, presumably across the lake. It is a statement of authority, reminiscent of the interchange with the centurion in verses 5-13. It establishes, again, that Jesus is a man of authority, this time as he deals with those following him. There is a distinction drawn here between the large crowd, which seems to seek to define Jesus and following him in ways that please themselves, and Jesus himself and those who truly follow him.

Just as much as it seems to have been in the previous section, and in the Sermon on the Mount, this seems to be a section about Jesus' authority.

### **(ii) Would-be follower I (vs.19-20)**

As Jesus and his followers prepare to move away, someone approaches them – **look at verses 19-20... READ.**

The man is a 'scribe'. He is a religious lawyer. He is a man who is deadly serious about honouring God by knowing, and obeying God's revealed word. His greeting is sincere and respectful. His statement is one that seems, on face value, to be one of wholehearted commitment.

However, all is not as it seems. This man speaks in a way that actually makes himself the focus. To put it simply, this man is confident that he can follow Jesus. This scribe has confidence in himself. This scribe has his security in 'I' – 'I will follow you wherever you go'. One commentator says that the man seems to be saying, 'Jesus, this is your lucky day – I am going to follow you'.

This makes more sense of Jesus' response. After all, if the man is serious and wholehearted and genuine in his desire, how do you explain Jesus' response?

Jesus responds by focusing in on the key symbol in human lives for security: the home, the place where everyone invests their security and finds their rest. In nature, foxes have a den, birds have a nest. But the 'Son of Man' – Jesus – has no such security.

By implication, those who are to follow Jesus wholeheartedly will be confronted by the question of where their security lies. Does their security lie in themselves and their abilities (like this scribe)? Does their security lie in their plans and their possessions and their aspirations?

By consequence, if you are to follow Jesus, your security must be in Jesus, and nothing else. To follow Jesus is to be stripped of all security that lies outside Jesus.

### **(iii) Would-be follower II (vs.21-22)**

Someone else approaches Jesus – **look at verses 21-22... READ.**

This person is identified as a ‘disciple’ – they seem closer in to Jesus. Their statement is a little ambiguous – their father could be elderly and nearing his end, and so they need to go home and care for him, or their father has died and they need to leave and bury him. In either case, the listeners around Jesus would have understood – the responsibility to deal in such a way with your father trumped all other responsibilities within Jewish society.

However, the key to understanding this disciples’ statement is not so much in what he desires to do but that this is his ‘first’ desire – did you see that there in verse 21? It is almost as if he is saying to Jesus – ‘I will follow you, but I have some things that need to be done first – some perfectly respectable and sensible and good things that need to be done first’.

In fact, the issue is highlighted by a clever play on words. As Jesus has commanded his followers ‘to go’ over to another place, this man uses the same word to say that, first, he has ‘to go’ and bury his father. The contrast is unavoidable!

Jesus’ response is clear and concise. It consists of two commands: ‘follow’ and ‘leave’. It couldn’t be clearer, could it!

Jesus seems to be making clear that those who follow him have their priorities set by him. Jesus defines 'following' him. Jesus defines the priorities of his followers. In this sense, he seems to be saying, those who follow Jesus have the priority of life – leave the dead with those who are dead (those who are not following Jesus).

In essence, Jesus' response focusses on the issue of priority, and priorities. It is an issue raised by the would-be follower – he has some other things that need to be focused on first, then Jesus can be followed. Jesus' response is an emphatic 'No' – a follower of Jesus has the priorities of Jesus. A follower of Jesus has their priorities set by Jesus.

Jesus is moving away from the crowd. He gives an order to go elsewhere, to his followers. A scribe approaches, proclaiming his security in his ability to follow Jesus. Jesus confronts him with where his security lies. A disciple approaches, stating his desire to follow Jesus after he has done other things. Jesus confronts him about his priorities.

Matthew is making very clear that Jesus has the authority to define what it means to follow him (REPEAT). As the crowd swirls, as followers approach with security wrongly placed, and priorities mis-established, Jesus states very clearly: 'I have the authority to define your following'. Put simply, if Jesus has the authority to teach, and the authority to save, then he has the authority to be Lord. Put personally, if you are going to accept

Jesus' authority as Teacher, and if you are going to receive his gift as Saviour, then he must be your Lord (REPEAT).

#### **4. Jesus has authority to define what it means to follow him**

Let me finish by drawing out some conclusions, through a series of observations...

##### **Observation 1: If Jesus has authority to teach and to save, he has the authority to be Lord.**

How far does Jesus' authority extend? Well, he certainly has the authority to teach. He certainly has the authority to save – through healing, and dealing with sin. That must mean that his authority extends to those who follow him. Put another way, Jesus is Lord and Saviour (REPEAT).

This is so important for us to grasp if we say that we trust in Jesus. We cannot have him as a Teacher and as our Saviour and draw the line at him being our Lord, our 'boss'. The authority he has as Teacher and Saviour means that he has authority to be the Lord of the lives of his followers, of God's people.

I suspect that is why Matthew has constructed this section like this – the picture of Jesus as Teacher (Matthew 5-7), the picture of Jesus as Saviour (Matthew 8:1-17) and the miracles over nature, demons and sin, for the benefit of people (Matthew 8:23-9:8) form a sandwich around this statement about the consequences of following Jesus.

Jesus is Lord – he defines what it means to follow him.

### **Observation 2: What Jesus is NOT saying...**

At this point, we must be very careful how we hear, then, what Jesus is saying. We cannot play these statements off against the rest of the Bible, creating contradictions where Jesus sees none. The natural outcome of this is that we decided what to hear and apply – Jesus is NOT Lord, and we are! We will come this a little more in the fourth observation.

Moreover, we musn't see these words as culturally or historically constrained, and we will come to that in the third observation.

We musn't see Jesus here creating a guilt ethic or a debt economy. Jesus is not saying here, 'Look how much I have done for you – what will you give up for me?' Nor, is Jesus saying, 'Look at how much I have done for you – how can you repay this debt you now have?' God never works that way – that is not the economy of grace and mercy that Jesus has just established in the section of miracles or teaching.

### **Observation 3: The historical present...**

It is not often that you want to turn to Greek to make a point – it just sounds arrogant and elitist! However, there are times when something stands out so much that you want to draw attention to it because Matthew seems to be doing something especially obvious.

As Jesus' response is recorded by Matthew, he has used a verb in the present tense. This stands out in the flow of the passage, because everything else used to describe the action is in the past – aorist or imperfect tenses. The effect is striking: what Jesus says is brought to the forefront of the exchanges – it makes it current whenever you read it – it brings it into the present whenever you peruse these events. In this sense, Matthew is making this application obvious for all readers, at all times. This isn't something culturally bound, or circumstantial – it is applicable at all moments.

**Observation 4: Jesus defines security and priority for his followers.**

Jesus is not establishing a series of contradictions for his followers at this point. For example, he is not encouraging wisdom (the making wise decisions about every day life based on the truth of God's revelation) to be played off against being devoted to Jesus (having security in him), nor is he playing honouring your parents off against honouring Jesus.

What he is doing is emphasizing in practical terms something that he has already taught. **Listen again to Matthew 6:33-34... READ.**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus described following him as being brought into citizenship in heaven, being connected to Jesus, having God as Father. In this sense, the followers of Jesus have God as their Father, and have his kingdom as their priority. They have security in their connection to Jesus and their

relationship with God, and they have their priority as God's kingdom.

For a follower of Jesus, this means that there is NOT a list of priorities that needs to be followed (God first, spouse second, family third...) or an acronym (Jesus, Others, Yourself). Jesus simplifies this to one priority: 'Jesus is my Lord – what does that look like...?'

This is a statement of security. As Jesus made clear in Matthew 6, those who call God Father, because they are connected to Jesus, will ALL that they need to be his people.

This is a statement of priority. As Jesus makes clear in Matthew 6, to be connected to Jesus is to have him as Lord, and God as Father, and God's kingdom as all, as the one priority, in every facet of life.

In essence, this means that Jesus defines all of our security and all of our priority – from our desires for leisure, to the job that we seek, through to our priorities for our marriages and our children, into the way we spend money and time, to the interactions we have with family and weekends and governments.

**Observation 5: Jesus as Lord will put you at odds with the world.**

To be blunt, this security and priority in Jesus will put you at odds with the whole world. Let me give you four areas that this will provoke some question, and conflict, with the world (perhaps even more in this current pandemic environment!):

First, how is Jesus Lord of your career and time management? As Albert Schweitzer says, Jesus was 'devoid of all middle-class security' and so too must his followers be. This will radically rework your understanding of employment, rest, career and the decisions that go with that.

Second, how is Jesus Lord of your family? If Jesus and his kingdom is your security and priority, how does this define following him in your marriage, in your family, in your household – and the way in which you view them?

Third, how is Jesus Lord of your parenting? If Jesus and his kingdom is your security and priority, how does this define the decisions you make in parenting, in the dreams you have your children, in what you pray for your family, in what your children understand about 'Jesus as Lord' from you?

Fourth, how is Jesus Lord of your leisure? If Jesus and his kingdom is your security and priority, how does this define the decisions you make in regard to your leisure pursuits, the way in which rest and family and children and leisure interact?

**Observation 6:** My final observation is really just a summary statement... **You cannot have Jesus' radical teaching, and his radical salvation without having his authority to radically re-define you, as your Lord.**

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Passage: Matthew 8:18-22