

# Portraits of Deficient Discipleship: A Theological Reflection on Matthew 8:18-27<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This paper aims to explore the way the evangelist Matthew illustrates the deficiency of discipleship by sketching three portrayals of deficient discipleship. The section under scrutiny is that of chapter 8:18-27 from Matthew's Gospel. The first portrayal is that of a disciple-to-be, described in terms of much enthusiasm without much understanding of the kind of teacher Jesus is (Matt 8:19-20). He is a proper illustration of the first type of deficient human attempt to follow Jesus, namely, discipleship without costs. The second portrayal, is that of an acknowledged disciple, described in terms of manifest hesitation that comes from an insufficient clarification of his existential priorities and of the kind of master Jesus is (Matt 8:21-22). This portrayal is a helpful illustration of the second type of deficient attempt to follow Jesus, namely, discipleship without commitment. The third portrayal is that of the called disciples, described in terms of fear that comes from the lack of understanding of the kind of Lord Jesus is (Matt 8:23-27). This portrayal is a realistic illustration of the third type of deficient human attempt to follow Jesus, namely, discipleship without hardships. Yet, in his answers in the encounters with the three categories of protagonists in the biblical text, Jesus offers corrections to all three types of deficient discipleship. And Matthew combines the revelation of the symptoms of the three deficient types of discipleship with the solution coming*

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*from Jesus' answers, to make the recipient-audience of his Gospel understand that discipleship is costly, is based on commitment, and involves hardships.*

**Keywords:** *discipleship, deficiency, costly, commitment, hardships*

## **Introduction**

The subject of discipleship is an important one for Christian communities all over the world. In this regard, the Bible has been for centuries the most important resource for the teachings on discipleship for believers. And in the Bible, the Gospels were always the most studied books from the perspective of discipleship. Moreover, the Gospel of Matthew was always considered as the gospel where the theme of discipleship is an important trajectory in the intention of the evangelist for his primary audience.

The present research argues that Matthew intends to show not only the journey of discipleship but also the deficient types of discipleship as part of this trajectory intended by the evangelist. The text under scrutiny for this research is from Matthew 8:18-27. Here Matthew offers three portrayals of what could be called deficient discipleship. One is that of discipleship that roots its beginning in human beings' decisions, discipleship that is enthusiastic but is not aware of the costs. The second one that will be argued is that of discipleship which is hesitant because of the confused existential loyalties. And the third is that of discipleship that is fearful because of insufficiency of trust in facing hardships.

Methodologically, the research starts with the first pericope, having in the center, the enthusiastic scribe with his declared decision to be Jesus' follower, followed by Jesus's answer in the form of warning and lament (Matt 8:19-20). The research will continue, with the acknowledged disciple, with his request to deal first with familial and religious obligations, followed by Jesus' answer in the form of a radical command (Matt 8:22). The research will end with the committed disciples in the boat fearful for their life in facing the storm on the sea, followed by Jesus's answer to them, rebuking them for their lack of trust in his competency to protect them, and then his miraculous calming of the storm.

### **1. Discipleship Without Costs**

The first portrayal is that of a disciple-to-be (Matt 8:19-20), described in terms of much enthusiasm without much understanding regarding the kind of teacher Jesus is. He is a scribe (Matt 8:19a), therefore a person with a vocation for learning. He seems to be in search of the proper teacher under authority to develop his personality and vocation, and he sees in Jesus that kind of teacher. In approaching

Jesus with such a confident statement: “I will follow you wherever you go” (Matt 8:20), this scribe shows a high degree of determination and the fact that he made up his mind.

His enthusiasm comes most likely from the impression created over him by Jesus’ teachings and miracles. This scribe likely understood what many others understood, that Jesus’ teaching comes from his authority, different from the way other scribes taught (Matt 7:28-29) (Howard 2023, 237). He might also have been an eyewitness or heard about Jesus’ miracles (Matt 8:1-17), which in Matthew’s gospel constitutes the context of this discipleship narrative *inclusio* (Talbert 2010, 111).

Yet, in his address to Jesus, the scribe reveals his vision of Jesus – a teacher, even though, the most impressive teacher encountered so far in his life (Bruner 2004, 519). David L. Turner observes the fact that “[t]hus far in Matthew, the scribes have not been presented positively (2:4; 5:20; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29...)” and the fact that in “Matthew those who call Jesus ‘teacher’ are not disciples (12:38; 19:16; 22:16, 24, 36)” (Turner 2008, 239). Matthew Henry is accurate in his observation:

His profession of a self-dedication to Christ is, [1.] Very ready, and seems to be *ex mero motu*—from his unbiased inclination: he is not called to it by Christ, nor urged by any of the disciples, but, of his own accord, he proffers himself to be a close follower of Christ; he is not a pressed man, but a volunteer. [2.] Very resolute; he seems to be at a point in this matter; he does not say, “I have a mind to follow thee;” but, “I am determined, I will do it.” [3.] It was unlimited and without reserve; “I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest; not only to the other side of the country, but if it were to the utmost regions of the world.” (Henry 1994, 1650).

The introductory address reveals also the fact that he placed Jesus on the same level as the other teachers of his time. Moreover, Bruner signals the fact that the subject in his address is himself, as he decided to follow Jesus (Bruner 2004, 519). Yet, the scribe will soon learn not only that this unique teacher cannot be followed without being Lord, but also that he calls disciples and elects them not the other way around. And Jesus’ call is not for a short-term missionary journey with a boat from one shore to another (Eaton 2020, 52), but for a life-long total commitment (France 2007, 872).

The answer of Jesus in Matthew 8:20 contains a warning that clarifies to the scribe the fact that his condition is radically different from that of the scribes of those days, who were able to offer their disciples protection of a house and existential security (Bruner 2004, 520). Jesus’ answer is also in the form of a lament for his condition in the world, namely that of destitution and marginalization. This condition is well described by Robert J. Myles:

Matthew's Jesus is unable to sink his roots firmly into any geographical region and is socially dislocated from normalized society. On the other hand, the scribe is likely situated at the centre of normalized society; his occupation is principally concerned with upholding the status quo of the ideological-political order that has seen Jesus displaced to the margins (Myles 2014, 126-127).

The reference to foxes and birds could be connected with the security and comfort, proper to the members of the political or the religious elite (Myles 2014, 119, 127) of those times. Yet, in depicting himself as the Son of Man, Jesus underlines the position of his existence on the tragic trajectory of great sufferers of God's people's history, whose recapitulation and culmination his life and suffering constitute. He is not only the "the Isaianic Servant of God (Isa 53:4)" (Ye-Atkinson 2020, 121), but also the suffering Servant of God.

Myles notices the presence of the verb κλίνω ("to lay") only in this text of Matthew 8:20 and is connected with its use in John 19:30, which describes the moment when Christ "bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (Myles 2014, 120). The fact that the cross was the only place to lay his head, illustrates the cost implied in following him. This disciple-to-be is a proper illustration of the first type of deficient human attempt to follow Jesus, namely, discipleship without understanding the costs. Yet, the cost of discipleship should be a part of the gospel (Bonhoeffer 1959, 48). And Matthew Henry makes the portrait of the scribe and Christ, a mirror in which any to-be disciple should contemplate his or her motivation to follow Jesus:

Now we should think ourselves sure of such a man as this; and yet it appears, by Christ's answer, that his resolution was rash, his ends low and carnal: either he did not consider at all, or not that which was to be considered; he saw the miracles Christ wrought, and hoped he would set up a temporal kingdom, and he wished to apply betimes for a share in it. Note, there are many resolutions for religion, produced by some sudden pangs of conviction, and taken up without due consideration, that prove abortive, and come to nothing: soon ripe, soon rotten (Henry 1994, 1651).

To sum up, this first portrayal of deficient discipleship is a reminder for disciples to-be of every generation that authentic discipleship starts with a call of Christ, not with a decision for Christ. The scribe illustrates very well the image of persons in history who attempted to follow Christ based on their blind theology of discipleship that is centered on the human self, confident of human capacities (so evident in the use of the word *everywhere* in Matt 8:19). The two disciples in the scene, as well as similar disciples in history, might be skilled dancers around themselves, whilst they are ignorant in regard with the costs implied in cruciform discipleship (so evident in the use of the word *nowhere* in Matt 8:20), as embodied by Christ's call and vocation. Or in the words of Walter Brueggemann:

The calling of God means for us to disengage from the postures, habits and assumptions that define the world of power and injustice that is so devoid of

mercy and compassion in every arena of life. The call is away from ordinary life, ordinary possession, and ordinary assumptions to a way of life that the world judges to be impossible. Thus, the call, is, indeed, to an impossibility (Brueggemann 2006, 95).

## 2. Discipleship Without Commitment

The second portrayal is that of an acknowledged disciple (Matt 8:22), described in terms of manifest hesitation that comes from an insufficient clarification of his existential priorities and of the kind of master Jesus is. Unlike the scribe in the first portrayal, this disciple is addressing Jesus as Lord (Matt 8:22a), even “though his use of the term does not necessarily mean he is fully committed to Jesus as his ‘master’” (Card 2013, 129). However, this disciple seems to be a very devoted Jew, who wanted to fulfill with scrupulosity his religious and familial obligations (Matt 8:22b). The lawfulness of the disciple’s request is underlined by Ben Witherington III:

To understand the radical nature of Jesus’ response to his disciple’s request, bear in mind that various Jewish texts indicate that the duty to bury someone supercedes even the most binding of religious obligations (m. Ber. 3:1; Tob. 4.3; 6.13), and this is all the more so when one is dealing with a member of one’s own family. Even a priest was required to set aside his priestly duties to bury his father or mother (S. Lev. 21.3). Only a high priest or a Nazirite was exempt from the duty of burying one’s father (Lev 21:11; Num 6:6-7) (Witherington III 2006, 188).

If in the case of the scribe in the previous scene, Jesus’ answer came as a warning and a lament about the costs of discipleship, in the case of this disciple, Jesus’ answer takes the form of a command. The contrast has the purpose of underlining the fact that these are negative examples of discipleship (Davies and Allison 1991, 39). And as such these examples illustrate types of disqualified discipleship, “the first’s enthusiasm arises from his ignorance of the cost of discipleship, and the second’s timidity is due to his awareness of that cost” (Turner 2008, 240). In both scenes, Jesus’ answers reveal the real meaning of discipleship:

To the scribe Jesus says that a disciple of his must live in a kind of homeless state in which no comfort or rest can be found. And to the student he says that to live in a homeless place is literally to be homeless, which means also to be society-less, and so whatever the demands of the home or of the society, they are to be discounted (Basser and Cohen 2015, 222).

In this second scene, Matthew creates another contrast, namely, that between the disciple’s request that “in his Jewish culture was a reasonable request” (Talbert 2010, 116), and the radicalness of Jesus’ call regarding the firstness of commit-

ment to him as Lord (Matt 8:22c). For, as Craig S. Keener's asserts: "following Jesus takes precedence over all social obligations, even those family obligations one's society and religion declare to be ultimate" (Keener 1999, 844). In the same line, Joe Kapolyo asserts that this disciple "is putting his social and family obligations before his discipleship" (Kapolyo 2006, 1153).

This disciple is hesitant because he is not fully committed to Christ even if he seems fully committed to the Law, and this reality is revealed by his attempt to negotiate his existential priorities. His hesitation in his practice of discipleship is an important reminder of the fact that discipleship requires a permanent decision to put loyalty to Christ first. Any hesitation to do that is walking backward in one's spiritual progress. This portrayal is a helpful illustration of the second type of deficient attempt to follow Jesus, namely, discipleship without commitment, symptomatic for a discipleship already begun rather than an indication of hesitancy to start following Jesus (Gundry 1982, 153). Or in the words of Heinz Joachim Held:

...the point in the second scene is no longer concerned with the first decision *in favour of* discipleship but with the repeated demand for a new decision in terms of complete obedience *within* discipleship. In this way, however, the interpretation of Matthew brings out the situation of the Church practicing discipleship (Held 1963, 203).

### 3. Discipleship Without Hardships

The third portrayal is that of the called disciples, described in terms of fear that comes from the lack of understanding of the kind of Lord Jesus is (Matt 8:23-27). However, they are obedient for they answered the call of Jesus in Matthew 8:18 (Gundry 1982, 154). If in the first scene, the scribe is characterized by enthusiasm without understanding the costs, and in the second scene the hesitant disciple is characterized by confusion in his arrangement of loyalties, in this third scene, committed disciples are characterized by fear, encountering the hardship of the storm on the sea. Yet, the storm is more than a storm and the story is more than a frightening experience on a troubled sea.

For some commentators the scene is a demonstration of Jesus' divinity and as such a reminder of God's sovereign salvific acts in the history of his people. Margaret Davies, for example, observes that "[i]n Scripture, the sea and floods are always viewed as dangerous (e.g., Genesis 6-9; Ps. 104.25-26; Jon. 1.4-6; Amos 9.3; Isa. 5.30; 17.12) and sometimes symbolize chaos (e.g., Gen. 1.2)," and might be that Matthew intends to make the story a mirror in which the readers to see the "dangers, social and political, which Jesus' and the disciples' insecure lifestyle would bring" (Davies 2009, 79).

For Robert Gundry, Jesus' rebuke of the disciples aims to address their "failure to rest in the divine authority of Jesus" (Gundry 1982, 156). On the same interpretative trajectory, Matthew Anslow the story has a Christological function, as in it Jesus is identified with God, as he is in the role of the One that in Scriptures is calming the sea that is "seen as a chaotic force that God orders, or with which God battles (e.g., Gen 1:6-10; 6-10; Job 38:8-11; Pss 74:13-14; 77:16; 89:8-11; 104:7; 107:23-30; Jonah 1:4-16)" (Anslow 2022, 438).

N. T. Wright connects this story with the divine action of taming the sea in Exodus and using the sea "to stop the disobedient prophet Jonah" (Wright 2004, 89), whilst Anslow connects the story not only with the mighty action of God in Exodus 14; 15:10, but also with its prophetic echo in Isaiah 43:1-2 "where it refers to YHWH's coming salvation of Israel from exile" (Anslow 2022, 438).

Other commentators underline the significance of the story for the illustration of disciples' journey towards maturity in their faith, as a mirror for the church's necessary journey towards maturity of faith. Gerhard Barth considers that the evangelist "here writes the situation of the Church into the life of the disciples during the earthly activity of Jesus" (Barth 1963, 111), whilst for Bruner as "[t]he quake (seismos, Matthew's unique word) hits the lake and covers the ship with waves," so "the world overwhelms disciples" (Bruner 2004, 523).

Gunther Bornkamm notices the uniqueness of Matthew's gospel to present the story as "a description of the dangers against which Jesus warns anyone who over-thoughtlessly presses to become a disciple" (Bornkamm 1963, 56). He also presents Jesus as the embodiment of God's kingdom, making this story "a kerygmatic paradigm of the danger and glory of discipleship" (Bornkamm 1963, 57). Keener considers that the story invites the vision of Jesus as the One that has authority over natural forces, has also authority over "whatever natural crises they may face, whether persecution (10:28-31), provision (14:32-38), the winds of eschatological judgment (7:25), or anything else" (Keener 1999, 849).

Moreover, Brian Wintle considers that the reason for the reversal in order from stilling the storm and then rebuking the disciples in Mark, to the Matthean first rebuking and then stilling "suggests that although Jesus found their lack of faith disappointing, his first gesture was one of loving reassurance" (Wintle 2015, 1238). Held offers an informative comparison between the purpose of the story in the gospel of Mark and the gospel of Matthew, underlying the focus on discipleship in Matthew:

Whereas in Mark (4.38-40, cf. Luke 8.24-25) the stilling of the storm takes place first and the words of censure addressed to the disciples follow, in Matthew the words of reproach occur first, and the miracle follows (8.25, 26). In short, Mark places the nature miracle of the stilling of the storm in the centre and the words addressed to the disciples are an appendage. By transposing the scene Matthew has created a conversation between the disciples and Jesus

and placed this in the centre, so that now the stilling of the storm looks like an appendage. In this way it is no longer Jesus and the elements that constitute the theme of the narrative but Jesus and his disciples who are in peril. The miracle story becomes a story about the disciples, so to speak. The evangelist works into the story of the stilling of the storm the picture of the Church in her discipleship (Held 1963, 203-204).

To sum up, this portrayal is a realistic illustration of the third type of deficient human attempt to follow Jesus, namely, discipleship without hardships. Discipleship starts with obedience but continues with trust. From a biblical perspective, fear is a sign of lack of trust, and fearful disciples are epitomes of discipleship without hardship. Yet, the type of trust that is Christlike, shown in his peaceful sleep amid a troubled sea (Matt 8:23-27) matures amid existential hardships not in their absence. And this is the journey for all committed disciples of God's people in history, from weak faith to mature faith. The fear is an expression of self-preservation whilst trust is an expression of total confidence in Jesus.

## Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the way the evangelist Matthew illustrates the deficiency of discipleship by sketching three portrayals of deficient discipleship, in the three scenes of Matthew 8:18-27. The scribe in the first scene, a disciple-to-be, characterized by much enthusiasm without much understanding of the kind of teacher Jesus is (Matt 8:19-20), is a proper illustration of the first type of deficient human attempt to follow Jesus, namely, discipleship without costs. The disciple in the second scene, described in terms of manifest hesitation that comes from an insufficient clarification of his existential priorities and of the kind of master Jesus is (Matt 8:21-22), is a realistic illustration of the second type of deficient attempt to follow Jesus, namely, discipleship without commitment. The third scene, with the called disciples, described in terms of fear that comes from the lack of understanding of the kind of Lord Jesus is (Matt 8:23-27), is a realistic illustration of the third type of deficient human attempt to follow Jesus, namely, discipleship without hardships.

In all three scenes, Jesus' answers, corrects the protagonists' deficient views about discipleship. To the first, the answer contains a description of the condition of the Master that the disciple should embrace, that of homelessness and marginalization. To the second, the answer contains a command to put the following of Jesus, first, above all other existential loyalties. To the group of committed disciples, Jesus' answer contains a diagnosis of their lack of trust in him.

All three answers are more than answers for them there and there. They are explanations of the coordinates for Christlike discipleship, that start with a call for a radical change in life, a permanent decision to embrace the costs, the demands,

and the hardships, involved in following Jesus Christ as Lord. As such, these coordinates, reveal the trajectory of biblical discipleship where dedication, commitment, and trust are paramount for followers of Christ, of every generation.

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### **Portreti manjkavog učenitstva: teološko promišljanje o Mateju 8,18-27**

#### Sažetak

Cilj je ovoga članka istražiti način na koji evanđelist Matej prikazuje manjkavost učenitstva skiciranjem triju portreta ljudi čije je učenitstvo bilo manjkavo. Usredotočit ćemo se na Matejevo evanđelje 8,18-27. Prvi portret prikazuje nadobudnog učenika, kojega Matej opisuje kao entuzijastičnu osobu koja ipak ne razumije kakav je Isus učitelj (Mt 8,19-20). Ova je osoba prikladna ilustracija prve vrste manjkavog čovjekova pokušaja da slijedi Isusa, a možemo je nazvati besplatnim učenitvom. Drugi portret pokazuje osobu koja jest učenik, no koja ipak oklijeva slijediti Isusa zato što mu nisu jasni vlastiti egzistencijalni prioriteti i ne razumije kakav je Isus učitelj (Mt 8,21-22). Ovaj portret služi nam kao korisna ilustracija druge vrste manjkavoga čovjekova pokušaja da slijedi Isusa, koju ćemo nazvati neobvezno učenitstvo. Treći portret prikazuje učenike koji su pozvani, ali

su ipak opisani kao oni koji se boje jer ne razumiju kakav je Isus Gospodin (Mt 8,23-27). Ovaj je portret realistična ilustracija treće vrste manjkavoga čovjekova pokušaja da slijedi Isusa, a to je učeništvo bez nevolja. Međutim, kada se susreo s ovim trima kategorijama protagonista u biblijskom tekstu, Isus je ispravio sve tri vrste manjkavog učeništva. Štoviše, Matej spaja simptome ovih triju vrsta manjkavoga učeništva s rješenjem koje nalazimo u Isusovim odgovorima kako bi primateljima – čitateljima svoga Evanđelja – pomogao razumjeti da učeništvo ima cijenu, da iziskuje obvezu i podrazumijeva nevolje.