OUCH

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Cardinals or Steelers?

I'm pulling for the Cardinals. Can you believe I just make a sports reference? Even I know there's a little football game this afternoon. Now I'm not a big Cardinals fan (or a big football fan, as far as that goes). But I have to cheer for the old guy. One of the big stories of the day is Kurt Warner and his return to the Super Bowl at the ripe old age of 37. He's one of just two quarterbacks in history to lead two different teams to the Super Bowl. Plus he's a devout Christian and all around nice guy.

But they say that the key to his success, maybe what defines his style as a quarterback more than anything is his accuracy. Even when he's being rushed, he never loses focus and places the ball exactly where his receivers need it. If there's a defender in front of them, he puts the ball behind them. If they're running all over the place, he still throws right where they're going to end up. He has an uncanny ability to hit his mark with precision.

Jesus had a similar ability. No matter who he was talking to, he could hit his mark. He could deliver a message that would be right on target and hit people dead on, every time. And those remarks were every bit as life changing as some of the physical things he did.

So far in Matthew, we've looked at stories about how Jesus' healing ministry changed people's lives. This morning we're going to look at some of those life changing words he delivered with such incredible pinpoint accuracy.

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."

Ever seen a baby getting its first taste of something with a really strong flavor? There's no trying to hide the reaction or pretending they like it. It's all instinct and it's very clear what they're feeling.

I have a similar reaction when I read some of these words by Jesus. They just sound so harsh. We cringe when he makes these strong statements, because they sound sour. Is this the loving Jesus we know? Especially in our age of political correctness and careful word choice, comments like these make us wince with anxiety and confusion. Did he really just say that? Ouch.

There's an old Monty Python sketch where a woman comes into a bookstore wanting a book about birds, but she wants one without the gannet, which is a common British bird. Of course all the books have that bird, so after being frustrated for a while the salesman just rips the page with the gannet out of the book for her. Then she doesn't like the robin or the nuthatch, so he rips another and another…and then she says she can't buy the book because it's torn. But sometimes we wish we could do that with our Bibles – just rip out the sections that we don't like or we don't understand.

That's not an option, though. As Christians, we don't shape God's word to be what we want – we choose to let it shape us. We choose to put ourselves under its authority. Easy when the words are comforting – not so easy when we what's being said is difficult or painful or hard to grasp. It tests our commitment and we have to wrestle with the implications.

That's exactly what the two men in this passage are doing – wrestling with what Jesus is saying, trying to make sense of it. In both cases, Jesus is holding up a mirror for these men to see themselves better. Both of them are living with a false idea of how deep their devotion to Christ really runs. Just a few remarks from Jesus and they are left reeling.

It's still a very timely topic. I just saw a statistic this week that said 78% of Americans consider themselves Christian. That's a staggering percentage. But you don't have to scratch very far to find that commitment is pretty shallow. You don't see a lot of people changing their morals, their lifestyles or their spending habits to line up with Christ's teachings. The words Jesus said to the crowds back then still apply today.

Luke 6:46-47
"Why are you so polite with me, always saying 'Yes, sir,' and 'That's right, sir,' but never doing a thing I tell you? These words I speak to you are not mere additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundation words, words to build a life on.

In both of the cases we're talking about today, Jesus is challenging superficial faith. The situations are clumped together, and both men seem to get put in their place in a similar way. But their interactions with Christ are actually very different. Just like

parents have unique relationships with each of their children, Christ has a connection with each of us that is unique. He relates to us as individuals with distinct personalities and needs.

The first man we meet is identified for us by his occupation. He is a teacher of the law, or a scribe. Not many people back in Jesus' day had the ability to read and write. Scribes had both those skills, and so they soon became influential and vital experts for explaining and interpreting written documents, particularly Scripture. This man would have studied under a rabbi's teaching for years before becoming an expert in his own right.

From other stories in the Bible, we get the sense that not too many of these scribe types became followers of Jesus. His ideas were too radical. But this man reaches out with a desire to be near Christ and says, "Teacher, I'll go wherever you go."

Sounds like what Ruth told Naomi. It's a pretty amazing offer and a real display of loyalty. Basic leadership training would tell you to encourage that kind of enthusiasm in your people. If I were writing the script for Jesus' response, I would have had him say, "Awesome! Thanks for the support. Glad to have you on board. Come on – I'll introduce you around. Guys – this is Eli. He's a writer. He's going to be joining us from here on out."

But that's not the welcome Jesus gives him. Instead he replies with this cryptic line that sounds almost like a riddle:

"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

So…is that a yes or a no? Can I get in the boat now? The man is left to ponder both what Jesus is trying to say and how he should respond.

What's going on here? I think Jesus is picking up on some undercurrents in this man's offer to become his disciple. Because there is more to the line, "Teacher, I'll go wherever you go" than we might initially think. Hidden within it are some hints that he was both misguided and disconnected.

To begin with, he was **misguided**. He had a faulty idea of what it would mean for him personally to follow Jesus. If you know any juniors or seniors in high school, you may be familiar with the whole college selection process. Kids have to decide what they want to do when they graduate, so they review literature and videos and web sites from all the different schools or programs they're considering. Then they send in their applications.

It wasn't all that different of a process when students back in Jesus' day decided they wanted to go study under a rabbi. They would look around, compare all the options, then go to the rabbi of their choice and say, "I want you to be my teacher." Then they would join whatever school that rabbi taught.

Jesus used a different method for choosing his twelve disciples, making the call come from him rather than the students. But this man is looking at it from a more traditional perspective. He's been watching Jesus. He's seen the power he has and the crowds he attracts. He's drawn to more than just the teaching of Jesus.

This scribe is wanting to hitch his wagon to Christ's rising star. He sees a big future for Jesus and he wants a piece of the action. Money, fame, personal advancement, you name it. If he can get an in with Jesus, his future will be secured.

Jesus says to this man, "You say you want to go wherever I go, but I'm not going where you think. I've got no place to go. You're not going to gain what you think you're going to gain by joining me. You need to reflect long and hard on what I'm really about."

The man was misguided. We can be equally misguided when we come to Jesus. We have our personal agendas for him and that's not always a bad thing. As I said last week, it's okay to ask God for answers to our problems. He invites all kinds of requests. There's nothing wrong with being needy.

But our agenda needs to fall in line with his. We can't ask him to give us what we want when what we want contradicts his will. When Derek was working in sales years ago, he became friends with another Christian on the job. They both were doing the same work, bringing home the same amount of money. But Derek noticed that his friend was buying new cars and TVs that Derek knew he personally couldn't afford. So one day he said, "Hey what's going on? How can you make the same salary as me and live the way you do?" His answer was, "God has just really blessed us."

Apparently, what he meant by that was that God had blessed them with credit cards, because it turned out that he had racked up thousands and thousands of dollars in credit card debt. His understanding that God wanted him to live a good life took him away from God's true agenda for his well being, and he ended up creating an added load of stress for himself that became almost unbearable.

What expectations am I putting on God? What personal twist am I trying to add to his agenda? If I'm expecting that being associated with him will somehow make life in this world easier and more secure, I am probably not grasping what it means that the Son of Man has no home here. And if Jesus, the Creator of the universe had no home here, we cannot expect that our hearts will find total fulfillment in this world.

Besides being misguided, the scribe was also **disconnected**. By disconnected, I mean disconnected from his own frailty. His statement that he's go wherever Jesus will go places a heavy emphasis on his own personal ability to do just that.

There are other people who made similar statements. When James and John were lobbying to sit at Jesus' right and left in his kingdom, Jesus asked them, "Can you drink

the cup I'm about to drink?" They confidently said, "We can." They had no idea what they were talking about, but they were sure of their own abilities.

Another time, Jesus told his disciples that they would all end up abandoning him at his death. Peter wasn't buying it. He said, "Even if everybody else does, I never will." Famous last words. He ended up making the most public denial of all.

We somehow have a way of turning our following of Jesus into some show of our own strength.

I was flipping channels the other night and saw that Ted Haggard was giving his first public interview in two years. You probably remember the huge scandal he was involved in a couple years ago. Ted was an incredibly influential pastor of a megachurch and president of the National Association of Evangelicals, which has 30 million members. Then two years ago it came out that he had been secretly living a double life filled with drugs and moral failure.

I don't have much patience for TV preachers who have such a public fall. It turns my stomach and makes me so sad to see the kind of hypocrisy that gives the church a black eye. It's so damaging and hurtful on many levels, and I am quick to write off a man like that as a big phony. So I would flip to another station. But I kept coming back to the interview, because as I listened to him talking, I heard something genuine. I heard a man who had been broken and transformed by the whole mess.

He said the disgrace forever changed his entire religious experience. All his life, he had made his faith about working hard to serve the Lord. You hide the ugly parts of who you are and pray harder and fast longer to try and make them go away. And his idea of being a good leader was to present this image of having everything under control. So he developed this double life of deception and shame where his sins became a dark secret so he could maintain the façade on the outside. But when the truth finally came out, he couldn't keep up the lie anymore, and his ability to look strong for God crumbled away.

He hit bottom and was so low he couldn't think about serving Jesus at all. He came to the point where he was planning how he was going to take his own life. And that's when God broke through to him, because at his lowest, he says, "Jesus came and got me. He said, 'Now we're ready. Now I can save you…And I know from firsthand experience that he loves unrighteous people, because when I couldn't seek him anymore, he came and got me."

That makes all the difference in how we think about faith. To go from being the one working harder and harder and denying our own failures to the one who lets Jesus do the saving. That's the real power of the gospel.

When I couldn't seek him anymore, he came and got me. We so much don't want to get to that point. We can become disconnected from our own frailty, believing we have it in

us to follow Christ to the ends of the earth. I'll go wherever you go, Jesus. I'm ready. Bring it on.

But it's not about big statements of how we're going to be the ones to get it right. We don't come to Jesus for training to be better people so we can do it ourselves – we come to him for redemption and rescue. And we need his grace to touch every area of our life.

I love it that it is in the context of talking to this man where Jesus first refers to himself as the Son of Man. It is by far his favorite self-description, and it is his most humble title. It's his way of identifying fully with being human. He's not just the Son of God – he's the Son of Man. It's as the Son of Man that he is homeless with no place to lay his head. It's as the Son of Man that he walks the earth and serves the people he meets. It's as the Son of Man that he is beaten and cursed and killed. He's not putting this man in his place from above – he's pulling him back down from below.

So the title Son of Man indicates humility. But Scripture also uses that term when it talks about Christ's eternal brilliance and splendor. Daniel sees the Son of Man coming on the clouds, full of power and glory. It's the Son of Man who has the eyes that burn like fire and the voice like a waterfall and the face that shines like the sun. It's the Son of Man that conquers death and walks among the churches in Revelation.

In other words, throughout the Bible you've got Jesus described as the Son of Man going from the low end to the high end. And because the name emphasizes Jesus' humanity, it tells us what he wants to do with the our humanity – to take us from our lowest, darkest moments and lift us up with him to be included in his glory where we will one day be all he created us to be. And it's because of him. Our misguided, disconnected attempts to go wherever he goes don't factor into the equation. We don't get there because we're strong, we get there because he carries us.

If the scribe was too hasty in declaring his devotion to Christ, the next man Luke tells us about is dragging his feet.

Another disciple said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

That seems like an incredibly reasonable request. So it is shocking to hear Jesus respond with

"Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

It sounds so heartless and almost cruel. Can't this poor guy even grieve and pay his last respects? What's so wrong with that?

Now before we get all offended, we need to make sure we're offended for the right reasons. With 2000 years and a wide culture gap between us, it's quite possible that this statement sounded far different to the first listeners. This could have been a common expression that we're not aware of. We've got plenty of strange sayings that could sound

meaningless in other languages. “The early bird catches the worm.” “People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.” “A stitch in time saves nine.” I’m even a little fuzzy on that last one.

So we have to concede that there’s a possibility Jesus’ words sound worse to us than they were originally. But at the same time, we can’t try to sugar-coat things either. The theologian F.F. Bruce once wrote that if our way of dealing with the hard sayings of Jesus is to soften them, we’re probably interpreting them wrong.

There are a few things we know for sure. One is that it was extremely important in Jewish society for a son to be the one to bury his parents. In fact, according to their customs, that one responsibility outweighed all the other commands. You were excused from other normal duties to make sure you got that one right. It was the ultimate way to show that you were honoring your father and mother.

Another thing we know for sure is that Jesus is always consistent in his character. So when we struggle with understanding some of his words that are maybe harder to interpret, we can compare them with what he said in other times and places that was maybe a little more straightforward. And we can know the two will never be in conflict.

In this case we can look for what else he said about honoring parents, and it’s easy to see he placed a high value on it. In fact, he called attention to the hypocrisy of people who were DISHONORING their parents and claiming to serve God at the same time.

Mark 7:9-12
You reject God's laws in order to hold on to your own traditions. For instance, Moses gave you this law from God: 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'Anyone who speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death.' But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, 'Sorry, I can't help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I could have given to you.' You let them disregard their needy parents.

People were taking what was rightfully their parents and giving it to God, saying it was a higher calling. Jesus says that’s nonsense. You can’t disobey God and say you’re doing it for his benefit. Given that kind of statement, it’s safe to conclude that Jesus ISN’T suggesting that this disciple should take lightly the command to honor his parents in order to follow him.

So what is going on? There are a few possibilities. Some people have suggested that the man’s father hasn’t even died yet, and what he means in his comment is, “Let me wait until after my father dies, and then I will be freed up from my family responsibilities and in a better position to join you.” He’s using his dad as an excuse to not go with Jesus.

Other scholars think the man was too easily influenced by his family, and Jesus knows that if he doesn’t follow him at the moment, he will go back home and be talked out of it by his relatives and the chance will be lost. So this is a highly individualized word from Christ dealing with one specific situation.

Still other theologians have looked at the fact that the Jewish burial ritual happened in two stages. First, the body was wrapped in a shroud and laid in a grave, much like Jesus would be. Then after time had passed and the body had decomposed, the bones were transferred to a box called an ossuary, and that was the final resting place. So, the theory is that it was the transfer of his father's bones that was in question, so it was more of a formality than part of the grieving process that would have happened right after his death. It's less emotional of a situation than we originally imagined.

The truth is – all those scenarios are possible, but we can't prove any of them. And we can't hang our understanding of Jesus' words on very flimsy evidence.

So where does that leave us? No matter how you look at it, Christ's words press home certain points we cannot ignore. Strip away the specifics of this man's situation and you're left with three undeniable takeaways from this conversation.

First, **Christ is urgent**.

When we feel that nudge from the Holy Spirit and know that Christ is asking us to do something, there is no time for delay.

John Kotter, a Harvard Business professor, wrote an article this past fall. He had gone in and observed a company that, like most companies, was struggling with the economic downturn. But he said what amazed him was an "astonishing lack of urgency." He said he mostly saw people finger-pointing and assigning blame. They didn't take ownership of the problem. And workers were frantically trying to look busy without doing any real productive work.

That's so often how we respond to Jesus. We don't react directly, we look around for excuses as to why we don't answer his call. We put the blame or responsibility on other people as to why we take issue with his demands on us. We have what we feel are valid reasons for not jumping up right away.

Have you seen the T-shirt that says, "Jesus is coming. Look busy?" It's kind of like the workers at that business – everybody trying to appear on board and plugged in without actually making any progress. We can easily fill our lives with busyness that doesn't move us one step closer to following Jesus.

The author of that article defined true urgency as,

a set of emotions, a gut-level feeling that we need to get up every single day with total determination to do something to deal with those hazards and opportunities and make some progress, no matter how modest, and do so today.

Today. Some of you know exactly what it means to put God off. For some of you, it's that initial decision to give your life to Christ. There's always been a reason to hesitate.

For other people, you may have made that choice, but you've been avoiding a step of obedience he's asking of you. Something you need to come clean about. A hurt you need to let go of. A relationship you need to pursue. You know what he's asking of you, but it scares you, so you've always been able to rationalize putting it off. Christ is standing here saying "No more excuses. Whatever you think is more important, it isn't. Come follow me."

2 Corinthians 6:2
I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

Now. The call is an urgent one. The window for response is wide open.

The second major point we can pick up from this disciple's experience is that **Christ is supreme.**

All our loyalties. Everything we feel responsible for. All our relationships. Every single priority we have in life takes a back seat to Christ. Abraham Kuyper put it this way: "There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, "This is mine! This belongs to me!"

Whenever other obligations or people or circumstances compete for our attention and our heart, Jesus will be right there saying, "Set it aside. It will take care of itself. You keep your eyes on me."

As our own New Day core value puts it, the Who question outranks the how question. Yes there are things that need doing. Where is Jesus in the mix for us? Do his desires take precedence over our own? That is a daily, hourly question that is just as critical for us as it was for that disciple.

One last point I believe we can draw from this conversation is that **Christ is life**. These are the options held out to the disciple: Go back to a situation where you are defined by death, where you are chained down by the demands, held in one place by the fact of death. Or, be freed by the one who is the resurrection and the life. Be part of God's amazing work of restoring and redeeming and reviving.

These are our options, too. Put up with the decay and the death we've been carrying around, or set it down and run to the only one who can resurrect us and raise us up.

It makes me think of the words of Charles Wesley in his great hymn:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke – the dungeon flamed with light!
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth and followed Thee.

When Christ calls us away from our current surroundings, it can at first feel impossible or like too high a price to pay. But he is calling us into life. The sacrifices are nothing compared with who he is and what he offers us.

For both this disciple and the scribe, Matthew stays quiet when it comes to their response. We don't know what they ended up doing with what Jesus told them. It is almost as if Matthew doesn't want to distract us with their choice so that we are left to deal with the same words in our own settings, to hear Jesus say such troubling things and have to decide for ourselves what to do about it.

Mark Twain once said, "It ain't those parts of the Bible I can't understand that bother me. It is the parts that I do understand."

Sometimes what we struggle with most about Jesus' words is not that they are unclear. It's that they're all too clear. And understanding them means responding. The "ouch" is not that the sayings of Christ are complicated – it's that they're personal., and we can't escape feeling them deeply.

As we come to the Lord's Supper today, Christ is once again calling us, saying, "Follow me. It's not what you think it will look like. But it's not something to put off any longer. This is the day to give me your full heart. This is the day to let go of trying to do it all yourself. This is the day to choose life".

Like the Son of Man, there's nowhere in this world for us to truly call home. Now is the time to find what it means to make him your true home."