

Lessons From Would-be Disciples



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 8:19–22, 19:16–26, Mark 10:17–23, Luke 4:16–30, 18:18–30, John 3:1–21.*

Memory Text: “Another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’” (*Luke 9:61, 62, RSV*).

Life comes filled with mysteries at every level. From the workings of subatomic particles, to the very nature of space and time themselves, there is so much we do not even begin to understand.

Probably, though, of all things mysterious and hard to fathom, nothing is more so than the workings of the human heart. People, in an instant, for reasons that seem so unknowable (perhaps even to themselves), make decisions that can impact their lives in a dramatic way, for good or bad, for all eternity. No wonder that Scripture, when talking about the heart, says, “Who can know it?” (*Jer. 17:9*).

This week we will look at some would-be disciples and the decision of their hearts.

The Week at a Glance: What do the Gospels say about would-be disciples? What lessons may we learn from their experiences that can inform our discipleship, strengthen our faith, and deepen our commitment?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 26.*

The Scribe

Read Matthew 8:19, 20 (see also Luke 9:57, 58). What is the point of this story? What message is here for us? What principles can we take from it?

Here is a case of someone who, not specifically called by Jesus, volunteered instead. Notice, too, just how intense his profession was. He would follow the Lord anywhere. It is easy, even for a true follower of the Lord, to make all sorts of pronouncements about being faithful (Luke 22:33); it is not so easy, however, to follow up on them (*vs.* 55–61).

When was the last time you made some bold promise of faithfulness to God that you later broke? What lesson did you learn from that experience?

What also is interesting about this encounter is that the person who came to Jesus with that profession was a scribe, one of the educated elite in Israel. They were men of “culture, education, and station in life.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 365. Few scribes identified with Jesus; they were too upstanding. They followed Him, not to be influenced by His teaching but to entrap Him. Yet, here was a scribe who was touched by Jesus’ teaching to the extent that he volunteered to become a disciple.

Yet, Jesus knew the heart, and His response shows that, perhaps, this scribe’s motives were not pure. He may have wanted to join himself to Jesus in hopes of gaining worldly advantage. Christ’s response, however, quickly should have disabused him of any such notions. In the end, the text does not tell us what the ultimate choice of this scribe was. From what Jesus said, it is not hard to imagine the scribe turning away.

How do we understand what was happening with this scribe and with, for instance, Christ’s words in Mark 10:30? Are we not promised some immediate advantages in following Jesus now? If so, why is it not wrong to want those advantages? Or is it?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 8:21, 22*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that being a disciple involves the whole heart.

Feel: Nurture a desire to put Jesus first.

Do: Commit to rooting out all that keeps us from Him.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Would-Be Disciple

A We don't know his name, or whether he was a Nazarene goatherder or a butcher from Bethsaida. But Matthew says he was a "disciple" of Jesus. Thus, he didn't dispute the significance of Jesus' call—only its timing. Why wasn't the call enough?

B Jesus' response to let the dead bury the dead suggests that if this disciple didn't commit fully now, he never would. What is the danger of procrastination?

II. Feel: A Love for God Above Everything Else

A Not all this man valued—filial duty, honor—was bad. When does what is good become our enemy?

B The response Jesus gave the unnamed disciple seems discouraging. Was that His intent? How should we understand it?

C How do we, like this man, rationalize our refusal to arrange priorities properly? (After all, honoring one's father is God's law.)

III. Do: Removing Hindrances

A This individual had his double-mindedness revealed by Jesus for all to see. How do our choices reveal our true focus?

B Consider this man in light of the parable of the sower. Which one of the "seeds" is he most like? How can we avoid being weed choked by the cares of this world?

► **Summary:** It is not enough to want to be disciples of Jesus; we must want Him more than anything else.

An Unnamed Disciple

Read Matthew 8:21, 22. How do you understand what is going on here? Why would Jesus say something like this to a person who first wanted to bury his own father?

Yesterday we viewed a scribe who sought discipleship. Today we encounter another volunteer, but one who is neither named as an individual or identified with a specific group. Examining the narrative, one wonders if Jesus was not unreasonable in His expectations. The man asked to bury his father, and in the Jewish faith it was a sacred duty to ensure a decent burial for a parent. What is going on?

Contrary to popular belief, the young man's father was neither dead nor even at the point of death. It was even possible that he was at the time "enjoying good health, and the time of his death was indefinitely in the future."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 366. If this is so, why did the man answer the way he did? Was it an excuse, one that Jesus saw through? Because the dead were usually buried the same day, had his father actually died, there would not have been a problem, because he could have attended to matters and then returned to discipleship.

This man's response revealed his character. In contrast to the scribe's hastiness and impulsiveness, he was slow, lethargic, lacking in zeal for the work, indecisive, and prone to procrastination. He was in fact delaying his discipleship to the indefinite future because he did not want to make an immediate commitment. If he did not commit right then, he would perhaps never commit. The man was, apparently, saying that he could begin discipleship only when the time was convenient for him. Furthermore, Jesus wanted it known that because of the limited time He had for ministry and training disciples, discipleship required undivided attention and full commitment.

Is the Lord calling you to do something (End a relationship? Give up a habit? Be faithful in title? Witness to someone?) that you intend to do, but not now? What are the dangers of delaying?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Key Concept: True disciples respond immediately to Jesus' calling without delay, excuses, or hesitation.

Have you ever found yourself in a life or death situation? Dutch sea Captain Johan Lindeman did. All summer long Captain Lindeman had taken boatloads of European sightseers to an uninhabited island to experience the fanfare of an active volcano. On August 26, 1883, the little island, too small to even bother naming on most maps, exploded.

Lindeman was in the Sunda Straits at the time Krakatoa erupted. Heavy ash and pumice fell on the ship. The choppy waters made it impossible to land. Early next morning, the captain watched a wave sweep away those gathered on the pier of Telok Betong and beach a ship among coconut trees. To save his ship, he dropped both anchors, heading straight into the waves.

The ship was tossed violently. Sulphurous acid burned the air. In minutes the deck of the ship was covered in a foot and a half of pumice. The sea heaved convulsively as the crew worked desperately to clear the deck. It seemed a losing battle. A giant wall of water came at them.

Lindeman lashed himself down in the engine room. The monster wave hit and flung the crew from one side of the engine room to the other. The ship rode up the wave almost until it was vertical and seasawed down. All on board gave themselves up for dead. When the wind died down at around noon, a deadly calm ensued more frightening than the storm. But not one passenger lost his or her life thanks to the decisiveness of the captain who dropped anchor and headed straight into the killer waves.

Consider This: Instead of running from the waves, Captain Lindeman dropped anchors and headed straight into them. How did his quick thinking and action save the lives of his crew and passengers? Sometimes the right action involves considerable risk. In what sense is our calling to follow Jesus a life or death situation, even if it is not life-threatening?

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Bible Commentary

I. The Scribe (Review Matthew 8:19, 20 with your class.)

Many people called Jesus *didaskalos*, or rabbi (teacher), but few of them

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The Rich Young Ruler

Read Mark 10:17–23 (See also Matt. 19:16–26, Luke 18:18–30). What lessons can we pull from the story of this would-be disciple?

Today's lesson covers a colorful character. He did not come either timidly or under cover. He made a grand entrance. Mark says he ran to Jesus and fell on his knees before Him. While Mark and Matthew do not name the man, Luke says he was a ruler and thus perhaps a member of the honored council of the Jews. Matthew says that he was young. The name, the "rich young ruler," is a composite description derived from all three accounts.

In Jesus' presence, he immediately began a discussion, seeking, it seems, to flatter Jesus, who did not fall for the flattery. Instead, Jesus went right to the heart of his question, pointing the man to the law of God.

Why would Jesus, who knew that salvation could not be attained by works of the law (Rom. 3:28, Gal. 2:16), point him toward the law?

In a certain sense, the answer to that question is found in the response of the young man. Though he kept the law, he sensed that it was not enough. Something was missing, which is why he asked, "What lack I yet?" (Matt. 19:20). In other words, though he outwardly, in his actions, seemed a faithful follower of the Lord, something more was needed. Jesus' words, and the man's response to those words, showed that his heart was not truly converted. By pointing him to the commandments, Jesus showed him that true salvation is manifested in an obedience to the law that involves death to self. The man's wealth had become an idol to him, and Jesus showed him that, despite his outward propriety, his treasure was on earth, not in heaven, and he needed a radical change of heart.

You might be keeping the commandments, at least outwardly, but where is your treasure? What reasons do you have for justifying your answer?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

were scribes. No wonder that when one of them does, it is remarkable enough to be recorded by Matthew. Jesus stood for the destruction of their power. And yet, this man was drawn to the very One who threatened that power. How did this happen?

Jesus obviously had an impact on this man. Matthew reports a few verses earlier that Jesus had just healed the sick with nothing but a word and then healed the demon possessed. Perhaps this man had witnessed Jesus in action. This man was not just hearing Jesus talk; he watched Him work. He was confronted with more than the idea of Jesus; he was confronted with who Jesus was. And his heart stirred within him to follow the very Man his organization was striving to put to death.

Perhaps this was on Jesus' mind when He told the scribe to count the cost before following Him. Jesus was not trying to dampen his ardor or enthusiasm but to focus and test it. The Christian way is never easy. There's a cross to carry before there's a crown. There's self to die to and the need to put Jesus above every earthly consideration or obligation.

Consider This: What does it mean to “count the cost” of following Jesus? What is the difference between an emotional response and a true-heart commitment to Christ? How can you tell?


II. Seizing the Moment *(Review Matthew 8:21, 22 with your class.)*

We don't know this man's name, but we do know that he was already a disciple, which means he had already accepted a call from Jesus. But he was having trouble committing. His words to Jesus betray a heart torn between wanting to serve Jesus fully and discharging his obligations.

William Barclay explains the meaning behind the Middle Eastern expression “I must bury my father.” When the would-be disciple said this to Jesus, he was really saying “I can't leave home and follow You, Jesus, until after my father's death, which might not happen for many years. In the meantime, I need to fulfill my duties to my parents and relatives before I can leave.” This custom was considered a sacred duty for a son.

Jesus' response lays bare the problem and the solution with a clarity that is almost brutal. Loyalty to the Lord trumps cultural expectations. “Let the dead bury the dead” is Jesus' way of saying “I get that you have an important obligation to your parents but your obligation to Me needs to come first. Get out now or you will never get out and follow Me.”

Consider This: Contrast the advice Jesus gave to the scribe in

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Nicodemus

One of the most famous accounts in the New Testament is that of Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night and asked the question, “How can these things be?” (*John 3:9*).

Read John 3:1–21. What “things” was Nicodemus asking about?

How interesting that Jesus would be talking to Nicodemus about the workings of the Holy Spirit when, in fact, it was obvious from Nicodemus’s words and actions that he himself was being convicted by the Holy Spirit. For him to come to Jesus, not to try to trap him (as so many of his contemporaries did) but to learn, shows the sincerity of his heart.

What can we learn from Christ’s words about discipleship from what He said to Nicodemus?

Jesus’ response to Nicodemus not only was tailored to his needs but, in John’s Gospel, serves to identify suitable and unsuitable characteristics for discipleship. It says that physical birth and descent from the Jewish nation are insufficient for authentic discipleship. Discipleship presupposes a rebirth that unites one with the heavenly realm and opens one up to the constant working of the Holy Spirit. That Nicodemus misunderstood all this even further revealed the inadequacy of merely being born a Jew, or being born into the right family; it also provided an opportunity for further instruction on the nature of discipleship. Although Nicodemus did not make an immediate and open response to discipleship, he at times acted as a secret disciple. At least initially, he was a would-be disciple, because he did not commit then. As we know, that later changed (*John 19:39*).

You might be of right descent; that is, you might be in the right church, with the right doctrines and teaching. Why, though, is that not enough? How can we avoid the danger of thinking that membership in the right church, or even knowledge of true doctrines, is all that we need?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Matthew 8:19, 20 with the advice Jesus gave the unnamed, would-be disciple. Why would Jesus urge caution in one breath and then urge haste in the next? Why do you think these two scenarios were placed back-to-back? How do they balance each other out?

III. The Rich Young Ruler *(Review Mark 10:17–23 with your class.)*

The story of the rich young ruler ends in a personal, direct call to discipleship. Before this Jesus lists the commandments: They were couched as negative prohibitions against what *not* to do. Here was the rich young ruler's fatal flaw. He was so focused on avoiding evil that he forgot about doing good. So Jesus' statement, "You lack one thing," really is a question that asks "You've spent your whole life avoiding evil and not doing harm to others, but what good have you done them?" This is Jesus' way of saying it's not enough to avoid bad things; we must do good things too.


The rich young ruler had an excellent reputation. But he lacked God in him, shining through his actions. And this one thing was *everything*. Without it, he had nothing, no matter how much he had. He wanted heaven. But not badly enough to give up everything to get it.

The Bible says that Jesus looked at him and loved him. This was *after* Jesus saw him for what he was—defective, selfish. But He saw him for who he could be. That is how Jesus' all-penetrating eyes take something in. He saw this youth's sincerity: He ran to Jesus. He knelt. He greatly admired the Savior. And Jesus' question, "Why do you call Me good?" was not so much a rebuke but an attempt to draw out from this young man a deeper profession of faith. In seeking to get the young ruler to clarify why he called Jesus good, Jesus wanted to help the young man test his sincerity and to see what he lacked. In that test was an invitation not just to behold his own weakness but to serve the only One who can save us from our weakness. The rich young ruler turned away because the cost of eternal life seemed too inconvenient.

Consider This: Often the call to surrender self is presented in language that seems harsh because there is no other way to save us than to cut us away from what will kill us if we cling to it. How does this explain why Jesus asked the ruler to do away with his possessions?

IV. Mob Mentality *(Review Luke 4:16–30 with your class.)*

The hometown crowd can often be the hardest to please, as Jesus soon found out when He stood up to read. He chose these words from the

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Herd Mentality

Salvation, we know, is personal. We are not saved in bunches; we are not corporately brought into the kingdom of heaven (*see Ezek. 14:20*). In the end, we each will have to answer for our own deeds, not for the deeds of others (*Rom. 14:12*).

Nevertheless, most of us do not live in isolation. We are in contact with other people, and we influence others, just as we are influenced by them. It is just part of human nature, even unfallen human nature (*see Gen. 3:6*), that we influence one another, either for good or for evil. How unfortunate that, unless we are careful, the influences can be negative.

Read Luke 4:16–30. What happened here? Why did the people, as a group, act as they did? What led to the downfall of these would-be disciples?

Though at first they all marveled at His words, once those words became cutting, they turned, en masse, against Him. Imagine if some would-be disciple there, instead of succumbing to anger, submitted to the rebuke humbly. Who knows what his or her influence might have been on the others? Instead, it says that they all in the synagogue became angry, so angry that they tried to kill Him. No doubt each one's anger influenced another, and then another, until the whole synagogue, who had come there to worship the Lord, in a spasm of anger sought to kill Him instead. Had any one of these people encountered Jesus' rebuke on a one-to-one basis, they might have been angry, but most likely they would have walked away. Now, though, feeling the strength of a mob, they acted in a horrible way.

How easily influenced are you by the crowd, by the prejudices and teachings of your own society and culture? What practical steps could you take that could help protect you from the dangers of this herd mentality?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

prophet Isaiah: “Because God hath anointed [*chrio*] Me,” which can freely be translated to mean God “hath made Me the Christ [the Anointed One].” There was no mistaking Jesus’ meaning.

What is interesting is that Jesus didn’t read the climax of the final passage of Isaiah 61:1, 2. It promised “the day of the vengeance of the Lord,” which the Jews took to mean salvation for them and retribution for their enemies. For Jesus to claim to be the Messiah and then to leave off the passage about vengeance seriously challenged their view of the Messiah and His work. Worse, Jesus dared to imply that the Messiah was going to offer salvation to their enemies instead of punishment.

This was too much for this crowd. Their fierce national pride resented the idea that the blessings of the gospel should be made available to heathens. Before He was done speaking they chased Him out of town. Had it not been for angels who shut Jesus in and led Him to safety, it would have been a cliff not a cross that Jesus would have died on.

Consider This: How important is influence? What difference would it have made if a Nicodemus or a Gamaliel (Acts 5) would have protested? What does this tell us about the influence and power of a single voice?

► STEP 3—Practice!

Thought Questions:

- 1 What is the danger to our faith of setting up false expectations of God? What do we have a right to expect from God?
- 2 The rich young ruler was sorry that conditions existed that would not allow him to have both his riches and heaven. How does this story define what idols are? What idols tempt us to give up heaven today?

Application Questions:

What does it mean to put Jesus first? How do we know we are truly seizing the moment to serve Him fully?

► STEP 4—Apply!

Just like the would-be disciple who pleaded with Jesus to let him take care of his family obligations first, we meet people whose hands seem too full to clasp hold of Jesus and follow Him. How can you be God’s hands to help free theirs to clasp hold of Jesus?

Further Study: Read *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 365, 366, 456–460, 602–605, 926–934; Ellen G. White, “Nicodemus,” pp. 167–177; “Peace Be Still,” pp. 333–341; “One Thing Thou Lackest,” pp. 518–523, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“In this age of diseased piety and perverted principle, those who are converted in life and practice will reveal a healthy and influential spirituality. Those who have a knowledge of the truth as it is revealed in God’s word must now come to the front. My brethren, God requires this of you. Every jot of your influence is now to be used on the right side. All are now to learn how to stand in defense of truth that is worthy of acceptance.”—Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry*, p. 22.

“But while Nicodemus had not publicly acknowledged Christ, he had in the Sanhedrin council repeatedly thwarted the schemes of the priests to destroy Him. When at last Christ had been lifted up on the cross, Nicodemus remembered the words that He had spoken to him in the night interview on the Mount of Olives, ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up’ (John 3:14); and he saw in Jesus the world’s Redeemer.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 104.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Has there ever been a time when you got caught up in a herd mentality, when you went along with the crowd, perhaps in a fit of emotion, and did something you later regretted? If so, what have you learned from that experience that could help protect you from doing the same thing again?
- 2 Think more about the point addressed earlier this week regarding the idea that being part of the true church is not enough. What message is there for us as Seventh-day Adventists? How are we in danger of falling into that same trap, that idea that because we believe that we have truth, that is all we need? In class, talk about how we can protect ourselves from that delusion.
- 3 Review the reason that these would-be disciples used to not make a commitment (with, we know for sure, the exception of Nicodemus). What other excuses do people use? How can we as a church help those who are struggling with this momentous decision?
- 4 What’s the difference between being a “believer” and being a disciple?