

Answer:

To understand this powerful and somewhat shocking statement, we must first look at the historical and cultural context, then the spiritual implications of Jesus’ words.

1. Jewish Burial Customs: A Two-Stage Process

In first-century Jewish tradition, burial was not a single-day event. It involved two distinct stages: the initial burial and the secondary burial. The first burial involved washing the body, wrapping it in linen (John 19:40), and placing it in a tomb—often a family tomb hewn from rock (cf. Matthew 27:60). These tombs were shared by extended families and featured shelves (called *kokhim*) where bodies were laid to decompose.

After about a year, once the body had decomposed, family members would return to collect the bones and place them in an ossuary—a stone box. This second stage symbolized a kind of “final rest” and a deeper connection to one’s ancestors. That’s why the Bible says of patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that they were “gathered to their people” (Genesis 49:29-33; Numbers 20:24)—a phrase with both physical and spiritual meaning.

So, when the man in Matthew 8:21 said, “Let me first go and bury my father,” he likely wasn’t talking about a quick funeral. It could have implied a year-long process of mourning and family responsibility. He was, in essence, postponing his commitment to follow Christ.

2. Jesus’ Call: Radical, Immediate Discipleship

Another of the disciples said to him, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.’

(Matthew 8:21-22, ESV)

At first glance, Jesus’ response may seem harsh or disrespectful. But in reality, it reveals the urgency and priority of the Kingdom of God. Jesus calls His followers to put Him above all earthly obligations, even those as sacred as burying one’s parent.

This echoes Jesus’ other words:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

(Luke 14:26, ESV)

The word “hate” here is not literal hatred, but a comparative term—meaning that your love for Christ must be so great that all other loves look like hate in comparison. Obedience to Christ takes precedence over family, tradition, and cultural expectations.

3. Who Are “the Dead” in Jesus’ Statement?

Jesus said, “Let the dead bury their own dead.” Clearly, physically dead people cannot bury anyone. So who was Jesus referring to?

He was using the word “dead” in two different senses:

Physically alive, but spiritually dead – those without spiritual life, those who are alienated from God (Ephesians 2:1: “And you were dead in the

trespasses and sins...”).

Physically dead – those who have died naturally.

In essence, Jesus was saying: “Let those who are spiritually dead take care of the things of this world. But you—called to eternal life—must follow Me now.”

This aligns with Paul’s teaching in Romans 8:6-8 (ESV):

For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace... Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Following Jesus means stepping into spiritual life. Anyone outside of Christ remains spiritually dead, even if alive physically. When Jesus calls, He is summoning people from death to life (John 5:24).

4. Salvation Starts Now, Not After Death

Many people postpone turning to Christ, thinking they’ll have time later—after retirement, after business succeeds, after family responsibilities settle. But the Bible is clear:

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

(2 Corinthians 6:2, ESV)

We are not promised tomorrow. The call to salvation and service is urgent. That’s why Jesus demands immediate response—without hesitation or excuse. He said:

No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

(Luke 9:62, ESV)

Just as Lot’s wife perished because she looked back (Genesis 19:26), so too can we miss God’s best if we’re constantly glancing behind at the things we’re unwilling to leave behind.

5. True Discipleship Requires Sacrifice

Jesus doesn’t promise an easy life for His followers—but He promises eternal life. True Christianity is not about comfort—it’s about self-denial and full devotion.

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

(Luke 9:23, ESV)

That cross is not just suffering—it represents death to self, death to the world’s approval, and surrender to Christ’s Lordship.

Conclusion: Let Go and Follow Jesus

If Jesus is calling you—whether to leave sin behind, abandon dishonest business, or surrender a worldly pursuit—do not delay. Don’t say, “Let me first finish this,” or “After I handle that.” Jesus must be first or not at all.

God doesn’t take second place in our lives. He is King and Lord—and our response must be immediate, total, and joyful.

Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

(Matthew 10:39, ESV)

May you have the courage to follow Him fully—without hesitation, without excuses.

Be blessed as you answer His call.

What Did Jesus Mean by Saying, “Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead”? (Matthew 8:21-22)

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