

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead (Luke 9:60; Matthew 8:22)**

In Luke 9 and Matthew 8, Jesus, whose Hebrew name was Yeshua, made a puzzling statement. He invited a man to follow him, and that man said that he first wanted to bury his father. Yeshua then said:

#### **Matthew 8:22**

[Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.](#)

Yeshua's point seems to be that following him is the most important thing. That is not the part that is puzzling. What is puzzling is why Yeshua would discourage this man from burying his own father. One of God's commands is to honor one's father and mother. Is Yeshua really saying that this man should skip his own father's funeral? That doesn't seem to be honoring his father. What's more, he says, [“leave the dead to bury their dead.”](#) Is Yeshua saying that his followers should never bury the dead? Is he saying that they should leave that important task to people who are spiritually dead? Again, Yeshua's overall point is easy enough to understand: following him is important, and he will not tolerate any excuses. But surely obeying God and burying one's father is a legitimate excuse, isn't it? On the surface, Yeshua's words here seem harsh and unreasonable.

In this teaching, we're going to examine what Yeshua said here in its scriptural and historical context. When we do, we will find that Yeshua does not contradict the Scriptures here, and furthermore, while his statement is strongly worded, it is not as extreme and confusing as it first appears.

To start our examination, let's read the passage. First, let's look at Matthew 8:

#### **Matthew 8:18-22**

[Now when Jesus \[Yeshua\] saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. And a scribe came up and said to him, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus \[Yeshua\] said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Another of the disciples said to him, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” And Jesus \[Yeshua\] said to him, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.”](#)

Yeshua says, [“the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”](#) He seems to be warning that those who

follow him will have to endure some instability and uncertainty in their lives, which was certainly true of Yeshua's early disciples and apostles. He then tells a man that he ought to follow him instead of burying his father, which seems to indicate that a follower of Christ might face some family conflict and instability. In Luke's account, Yeshua makes a third statement as well, along similar lines. Let's read that account now:

#### **Luke 9:57-62**

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus [Yeshua] said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus [Yeshua] said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus [Yeshua] said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

As you can see, in Yeshua's third statement he says that following him is such an important and urgent matter that there is no time to even tell one's family members goodbye. This fits right in with the theme of this passage: following Christ is going to be a difficult and uncomfortable thing, and it may even put someone into conflict with their own family. This also matches Yeshua's words a few chapters later:

#### **Luke 14:26-33**

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. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

When Yeshua says that a person must "hate" his family in order to follow him, he does not mean that a person should spite his family and treat them badly. What he means is that following him may well cost a person all of the things that he holds dear, including his own family, and a disciple must be willing to accept that. To follow Christ, we must be willing to commit everything we have to him. This is similar to the test of Abraham from Genesis 22, where he had to decide if he was willing to follow God even if it cost him his own son. If a person cannot handle that kind of conflict or loss, then he cannot be a follower of Christ. The point is to count the cost and be willing to give up everything you have in order to follow Yeshua.

So, how can we reconcile this message of counting the cost with God's command to honor our parents? Was Yeshua telling the man who wanted to bury his father that he should dishonor his father? Well, to understand this, we should first explain that this verse is not quite saying what it appears to say at first. Let's read the part about burying the dead once again:

#### **Luke 9:59-60**

To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus [Yeshua] said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and

proclaim the kingdom of God.”

When we read this, we usually assume that this man’s father has died recently, and Yeshua is basically telling him to skip his father’s funeral. However, when we understand how burials were done in the first century, we see that this is almost certainly not the case. The Jews did not embalm their dead, and so when someone died, they were buried almost immediately thereafter (see Acts 5:5-10). It is very unlikely that this man’s father died just hours or minutes before his conversation with Yeshua.

So, if his father did not die recently, then what does he mean, “let me first go and bury my father?” There are two other possibilities. One possibility is that his father is still alive, and so he is telling Yeshua that he will follow him after his father dies and is buried. This is a much more reasonable possibility than the idea that his father died literally that same day. However there are still a couple of problems with this possibility. For one, this man has no way of knowing when his father will die. Why would he say that he will join Yeshua at some unspecified and unknowable date in the future? The bigger issue, though, is Yeshua’s response. What could he mean when he says, “let the dead bury their own dead”? Is he insinuating that this man’s entire family is spiritually dead? Or, even more concerning, is Yeshua suggesting that his followers should not bury the dead? Is he saying that only people who are “dead” in their sins should bother with such a task? Again, we understand that his point is for people to count the cost and be willing to alienate their families if that is what it takes to follow him, but to suggest that only a sinner would bury the dead is a very bizarre thing to say. Consequently, we don’t think that is what he is saying.

In that case, what is he saying? Well, if the man’s father has not died recently, and also is not still alive, then that leaves the option that he has been dead for a long time. But, if that’s true, why is his father not buried yet? To understand that, we must first understand how wealthy Jews buried their dead relatives in the first century. As we mentioned earlier, when a person died, his body was buried right away. Wealthy Jews placed the body in a family tomb, which was a cave-like structure made of stone. However, this was only the first burial. There was in fact a second burial about a year later. In that second burial, the dead person’s son would enter the tomb and collect the dead person’s bones. The bones would then be placed in a small box inside of the tomb called an ossuary. This second burial of the bones enabled more bodies to be fit into a single tomb, and it may have held some symbolic significance as well. Multiple historical sources attest to this practice. Here are a few examples:

“Rebbi Meïr also said, a person may collect his father’s or mother’s bones because it is an occasion of joy. In earlier times, they were burying them in ditches. When the flesh had rotted away, they collected them and buried them in cedar wood. On the day itself he was mourning, the day after he was happy, implying that his parents were at rest from judgment.”

-Jerusalem Talmud Moed Katan 1:5

“Any [dead person] for whom one rends [the garments] on his death, one also rends for him when his bones are gathered. For [a dead person] for whom one may not baste [the edge of his garments] on his death, one may not baste them when his bones are gathered.”

-Tractate Semachot 12:3

We also see plenty of archaeological evidence of this practice in Judea, specifically during the first century. Here is how Jewish historian Steven Fine summarizes this evidence:

“Ossilegium, as scholars call it today, was practiced by Jews mainly in Jerusalem and environs for about a hundred years—from just before the turn of the era until the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. (the late Second Temple period). The body was first placed on a shelf carved in a burial cave; after it decayed the bones were transferred to an ossuary.”

-Steven Fine, “Why Bone Boxes?” Biblical Archaeology Review, September/October 2001 (<https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/why-bone-boxes/>)

(see also: Eric Meyers, “Secondary Burials in Palestine,” The Biblical Archaeologist Vol. XXXIII (1971))

So, when the man in Luke 9 says that he must bury his father, he likely means the second burial where he enters the tomb and collects his father’s bones. This would mean that his father is already dead and buried, but he is still awaiting this extra burial rite which would happen on a specific date. If this is the case, it makes the man’s words much more understandable—the man knows exactly when that second burial will be, and so he knows exactly when he will be free to follow Yeshua. It also makes Yeshua’s words a lot easier to understand. First of all, Yeshua is not telling the man to dishonor his father, because his father has already been honorably buried. His body is already in his tomb. The second burial was an unnecessary ritual that only wealthy Jews who could afford family tombs would perform.

So, Yeshua was not telling the man to leave his father’s corpse to rot above ground rather than properly burying it. Nor was he suggesting that his followers should avoid burying people altogether. He was telling the man to skip this second burial ritual, which was an unnecessary tradition. This is not nearly as extreme and harsh as telling the man to skip his father’s funeral. Another reason to think that the second burial is at issue here is the words Yeshua uses: “[let the dead bury their own dead.](#)” This phrase makes a lot more sense if the man’s father is buried in a tomb that also contains other dead relatives. In effect, Yeshua would be saying, “Your father is already dead and buried; let the other dead people in his tomb worry about gathering his bones.” He is not suggesting that only spiritually “dead” people will bury physically dead people. He is saying that there is more important work to be done than rearranging dead bones. The kingdom of God needs to be preached now, and this man should not forego that important work for the sake of family traditions.

This interpretation seems to line up best with the Scriptures and with history. Yeshua is not telling the man to dishonor his father, nor is he suggesting that corpses should not be buried. He is telling this man that following him is more important than following first-century Jewish rituals.

While this interpretation makes Yeshua’s words less harsh and extreme, we should note that Yeshua is still not asking the man to do something easy or comfortable. He would no doubt offend his family members if he did not perform the second burial of his father. While this would not be dishonoring his father, it may well be seen as dishonoring his family, and he would face criticism and possibly even rejection if he were to forego this ritual and instead follow Christ. However, Yeshua’s point in this passage is that such criticism and rejection is the price of following him. In fact, one who follows him may have to give up everything he has. Yeshua will only take on disciples who are prepared to make such a commitment and sacrifice. Scholar Craig Keener puts it well:

“Jesus’ words in Matthew 8:18-22 were probably intended mainly to weed out would-be disciples who would prove weak in commitment...those who would genuinely be disciples of the King must count the cost before they begin following him.”

-Craig Keener, *Matthew* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove IL 1997), p. 181

So, in conclusion, in Luke 9 and Matthew 8, Yeshua was not telling a man to dishonor his father, nor was he saying that Christians should not bury their dead. The man was likely saying that he wanted to perform his father's second burial, the gathering of his bones, before he became a disciple. Yeshua told the man to "let the dead bury their own dead," which means, let the other corpses in the tomb worry about his father's bones. He wanted this man to follow him and preach the kingdom instead of following his family's traditions. The overall point he was making was that following him may well cost everything one has, and a disciple must be willing to pay that price.

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

**EMAIL:** [Info@119ministries.com](mailto:Info@119ministries.com)

**FACEBOOK:** [www.facebook.com/119Ministries](http://www.facebook.com/119Ministries)

**WEBSITE:** [www.TestEverything.net](http://www.TestEverything.net)

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