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## The Meaning of Matt. 8, 21. 22.

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The incident of the disciple who wished to bury his father before he became a regular follower of Jesus is related in Matthew and Luke. While there is not complete verbal agreement between the two accounts, harmonization presents no difficulty. Every reader will admit that the substance of the two narratives is the same and that, where differences are found, the evangelists simply supplement each other, the one adding a detail or two which the other has not recorded. It is not on account of harmonistic difficulties that the passage is somewhat baffling to some Bible readers, but rather because the principle of filial love and respect apparently is disregarded in the words of Jesus, and because His saying, "Let the dead bury their dead," sounds enigmatical at first. An examination of the passage with a view to setting forth the meaning of the saying of the Savior will, it is hoped, not be unwelcome to the readers of the THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

Having told a certain scribe who offered to follow Him of His extreme poverty, the Lord addresses one of His disciples (*μαθητῶν*). We need not assume that this man was one of the Twelve, — an old, but unfounded tradition says it was Philip, — since Jesus, before the opposition against Him crystallized, had many disciples or adherents. (Cf. especially John 6, 60.) According to the report of Luke, Jesus said to the man, "Follow Me." Matthew omits this call. But his account demands that we supply it, since without such a request the statement of the disciple, "Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father," would be unmotivated and unintelligible. The disciple does not refuse to follow Jesus, but is disinclined to do so immediately. Another duty seems to stand in the way: the obligation to bury his father; and he begged Jesus to permit him first to fulfil this obligation. The view which is usually taken of the situation which this man was in is that his father had just died and that the burial was impending, which the son naturally wished to attend. But let

it be noted that the story does not mention the death of the father at all. That the father had died is an inference drawn from the wish expressed by the man to be permitted to bury his father before enrolling as a regular follower of Jesus. Is that inference unavoidable? In my opinion that cannot be held. The words in question may have been spoken while the father was living and may merely have conveyed the wish for permission to stay with the father till his death and burial. That is the view which the old commentator Theophylact took of the case, and he has many followers. Various considerations may be advanced which lend support to this opinion. Would the man have been in the presence of Jesus at all if his father had died an hour or two before? That seems very unlikely. He would have been at home tending to the details of the funeral, which in Palestine, on account of the warm climate, takes place the same day a person dies, if possible. Furthermore, one cannot well see the point in the order of Jesus if He demanded that the man follow Him without delay while the funeral of the father was but an hour or two off. Why should the Lord have insisted on such an infringement of feelings and custom? Even if He was leaving the neighborhood, the next day would find Him not far away, and this particular man could have joined Him without difficulty. The objection will probably be made here that the words spoken by Jesus to a third man on this occasion and recorded by St. Luke, chap. 9, 61. 62, make it plain that what Jesus insisted on was immediate compliance with His call, and that only if we assume that the father had died and that the son was asking for a few hours' respite shall we be doing justice to the context. The narrative of St. Luke, in the verses alluded to, reads thus: "And another also said, Lord, I will follow Thee; but let me first go bid them farewell which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." The leave-taking from the family, it will be argued, could not have consumed much time. How simple for the man to bid good-by to his relatives and then to join Jesus! Still the Lord frowns on the request. It will be held that in the case of this man, Jesus desired to have his companionship without a minute's delay, not a few hours or a day later, and that the presumption is that the Lord's order addressed to the second man had precisely the same meaning. Immediate entrance upon His service is demanded in both cases — so runs the argument. My reply is that this view seems to be based on a misunderstanding of the

words of Jesus. In Luke 9, 62 the Lord does not say: "The matter is so urgent that even leave-taking must be dispensed with." He chides this man for the attitude he takes toward dedicating himself to the direct service of God. The man had not given himself fully to the Lord and was casting wistful looks at his old associations. Not the saying of good-by is branded as wrong by Jesus, but the unwillingness of this man to sever all connections with his relatives for the Lord's and His Word's sake. The question was not whether the circle of regular attendants of Jesus should be entered a few hours earlier or later, but whether the Master should be followed whole-heartedly or with reluctance.

Hence, in my opinion the case of the third man cannot be adduced to prove that Jesus in this context wishes to emphasize that not a minute's delay can be tolerated when He calls for service. That is a true principle, but I do not think that Jesus meant to give expression to it on this occasion.

Furthermore, we must remember, in order to be able to understand why this man asked for permission to stay with his father until the latter's death and burial, that the Jews considered it a sacred duty for a son to give his father a decent funeral. A. T. Robertson, who shares the view of Theophylact, points to Tobit 4, 3 as a passage which reveals Jewish sentiment on this point at that time. It would have been quite natural for a Jewish man whose father was old and decrepit and in all probability not far removed from the grave to refuse leaving his home till after the father had departed this life. Besides, there is a linguistic argument, which, it seems to me, has some weight. The Savior, in reply to the request of the man, says, ἀκολούθει μοι, "Follow Me." The form used is the imperative present. We could translate it more aptly thus: "Be My follower" (continued action). The saying of Jesus appears in a totally different light if, bringing out the meaning of the present tense, we render it thus: "Be thou My follower, My disciple, and let the dead bury the dead." The question for the man, then, is not, Shall I follow Jesus to-day or to-morrow, but the question is, Shall I be a direct disciple of Jesus, or shall I do something else for some time to come? If the meaning of the Lord had been, "Leave this minute; start your apprenticeship with Me on the spot," obviously the imperative aorist, denoting punctilious action, would have been the proper form to use.

This view is borne out, too, I think, by the version of Jesus' reply in St. Luke's account, "Let the dead bury their dead, but

go thou and preach the kingdom of God." The words of Jesus may be paraphrased thus: "You think your duty lies at home. In this you are mistaken. You have something far more important to do than to stay with your father and to bury him. You have to preach the good tidings of the kingdom of God." In other words, Jesus is contrasting two occupations and not two points of time for entering upon His service. Considering everything, I hold that the arguments for the interpretation of Theophylact are simply overwhelming. And if we accept it, not even the semblance of undue harshness remains in the words of Jesus.

The man, so we may conclude from all that has been said, was in a dilemma. On the one hand, filial duty demanded that he stay with his father. On the other hand, Jesus calls him to become one of His immediate followers. It was an instance where duties clashed instead of running parallel to each other. Jesus, who on other occasions inculcated obedience toward the Commandment, "Honor thy father and thy mother," as well as toward all other commandments, resolved the doubts of the disciple, telling him that His call had to be given precedence. The Lord here simply insists in practise on what He taught at another time: "He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me."

The remaining part of the paper will have to deal with the much-discussed words of Jesus, "Let the dead bury their dead." The Revised Version, heeding the pronoun denoting possession, renders them thus: "Leave the dead to bury their own dead," a point in which it has the concurrence of Moffatt and Goodspeed. That the pronoun has a certain significance will be seen as we proceed. No ink need be wasted to prove that the first "dead" cannot have reference to such as are physically dead, although Fritzsche advocated this meaning, regarding the word of Jesus as a paradoxical saying, signifying, "Let the dead bury each other! Leave the dead to themselves!" One feels that this view is ascribing a jest to Jesus, which would be without parallel in His other recorded sayings. Some commentators think that *νεκροί* here denotes the corpse-bearers, who had to carry the bodies of the poor out to the cemetery by night because nobody else attended to their burial. If that meaning could be proved for *νεκροί* and could be adopted here, the saying would no longer present any difficulties. But neither would it possess a deep and striking significance. However, I cannot find any evidence at all for this view. Among the Romans there were men appointed

to bury the bodies of the poor, but they were not called *mortui*; their designation was *vespillones*. (Cf. *Exp. Gr. N. T.*) To my knowledge there is no proof showing either that Palestine had public servitors of this kind or that the term "the dead" was so employed. In addition to this, the pronoun "their" excludes this interpretation. If there were *vespillones* in Palestine at that time, they were appointed to bury the dead of the poor, and not particularly their own dead.

Almost universally accepted is this interpretation, "Let those who are spiritually dead bury those who are bodily dead." This seems to me the only tenable and satisfactory explanation. The Bible more than once speaks of those who are unconverted as people that are dead. The passage in Ephesians, chap. 2, 1, is well known: "And you hath He quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins," etc. (*ὄντας νεκρούς*), where "being dead" evidently describes the state of unbelief here on earth. We can then appeal to Biblical usage if we give the first "dead" a spiritual significance. The pronoun "their" is quite fitting if we accept this view. The Lord says: "Let those who are spiritually dead attend to the funeral of the dead belonging to their family; that is an obligation which they have, they are not unwilling to fulfil it; give them leave (*ἄφεσις*) to do so." In his extended discussion of our passage, Bengel renders "their dead" by *necessarios*, that is, relatives, and points to Gen. 23, 4 as confirming this view.

An interpretation which is now and then put on these words of Jesus makes them say: "Let those who are spiritually dead bury the deceased who during their life were spiritually dead; in other words, let the spiritually dead bury each other; let the funeral of unbelievers be performed by unbelievers." The pronoun "their" then has the significance "of their own kind." But this interpretation of the saying of Jesus cannot be accepted. While the principle that a Christian pastor must not give a Christian funeral to unbelievers has Scriptural warrant, it must not be based on this saying of Jesus. The Lord is here not speaking of the funeral honors which the Christian Church accords its members. He is referring to the burial which people owe to a deceased relative. Besides, He is not laying down a general principle, but merely giving directions to the young man with whom He is conversing as to the course he is to pursue. Surely no one will hold that Jesus means to say: "A believing son must not bury an unbelieving father"; but that very thing would be the sense

of the words of Jesus if we adopted the interpretation under discussion. No, the son was told that he should forego burying his father, not because that would be wrong in itself, but because He had something far more important to do, namely, to preach the kingdom of God. Cf. Luke 9, 60. That the Christian Church must not give a Christian burial to unbelievers rests on other texts, namely, such as 2 Cor. 6, 14—18 and Jas. 4, 4, as well as on all those passages which teach us to be honest, sincere, and truthful; for to grant a Christian burial to an unchristian is, of course, a violation of the principle of honesty. The great abiding truth in the saying of Jesus is that when He calls us to perform a particular task, all else must be subordinated; that in such a case all other duties must be looked upon as being of minor importance, and the sentiment filling us must be that of Isaiah: "Here am I; send me." Is. 6, 8.

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