

DISCIPLESHIP AND FAITH

By

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Jesus did not say, “Go ye, therefore, and make church members of all the nations,” or “...make good citizens of all the nations.” What He did say was, “Go ye, therefore, and make disciples.”

In the enthusiasm of carrying out this commission to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:18) there has been a strong tendency to find an easier way than that which Jesus described. One is told how to become a Christian in three easy steps, steps no more difficult than signing your name or saying a simple prayer. The church is supposed to grow, therefore we have found a way to make it grow as rapidly as possible by lowering the requirements and putting nothing in the way of discipleship — such as real discipleship. Even those who insist upon Biblical standards of conversion; that is, repentance, confession of faith and Christian baptism, still seem to be reluctant to force the prospect to count the cost before assuming his role as a Christian.

It would be absurd to think that Jesus was discouraging discipleship by such statements as, “sell what you have, and give to the poor” and “if any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me.” Christ would not command His apostles to “make disciples” and at the same time teach them to discourage anyone becoming a disciple by placing obstacles in his path. The cost of discipleship is not a price placed upon it by Jesus in order to limit the number of disciples or to force each one to make a sacrifice. Rather, the cost of discipleship is pronounced by Jesus and emphasized throughout His ministry as a means of revealing a law that holds regarding all who would accept the invitation to be His followers.

There could be no higher achievement for any human than to become a true disciple of Christ; that is, a person who follows Christ. Jesus not only was God in the flesh, but as a mortal man He exemplified exactly what God desires of man, and in fact, what God demands and expects of man. To become a true disciple of Christ would be to reach the pinnacle of success in being exactly what the Creator intended a man to be. And this is just the test — whether we seek to be exactly what God wants us to be or whether we seek God’s approval while being what man would have us to be.

Such a test of faith is found in Mark, chapter 10. The rich ruler came to Jesus with a great zeal and sincerity seeking the way to life eternal. he confessed he had kept the law. He did not kill, commit adultery, steal or bear false witness. No doubt he held his head high, knowing that he had won the respect of the entire community for living a good, moral life. The question was, did he have faith? “What must I do,” he asked, just as if he were willing to go to any extent in obeying the Lord Jesus Christ. It was as if he were saying, “I believe so strongly that I will do whatever you say in order that I might have eternal life.” Discipleship demands faith. It requires believing and being willing to cast oneself fully, without any chance of recourse, upon the mercy of Jesus Christ; believing Christ will lead to that which is the ultimate good. The answer Jesus gave was most unexpected and unwelcome. “Go,” he said, “and sell what you have and give to the poor and come follow me.” We can readily understand the confusion that must have

reigned in the man's mind. Perhaps he had envisioned using his wealth to bring glory to Christ. Here was an opportunity for him to go out and do great things for Jesus Christ by using all of his great resources in a way that was pleasing to God. With this kind of ambition we find no fault. In fact, it ought to be multiplied thousands of times over. But the lesson to be gained here goes far beyond the use of money and reaches into the very basis of our relation to God, which is our faith.

The issue was whether one would give up his own ambitions and his own foundation for life and accept on faith that he could survive and find success in following Jesus without the resources upon which he had hitherto depended. It is a question for our times. Can we follow Christ with nothing else and for nothing else than simply to be His followers or must we rely upon all the vast resources that are available today?

The question is one of faith in the goodness of Christ. When the rich ruler approached Jesus, he addressed Him as "Good Teacher." Jesus said, "Why call me good, None is good save one even God." Jesus did not deny that He was good but rather affirmed the fact that He and the Father are one. But if good, as the rich man affirmed Him to be, He would not demand something that was bad. Therefore, to sell all that he had and follow Jesus was the very best thing that the man could have done. Here is faith. Shall we leave the security that the world has promised, the security which seems to stand so firm in the world — a good bank account, title and deed to our own property, a good standing in the community, a vocation for which we are fitted and in which we are successful — shall we walk away from this kind of security, this kind of foundation, to follow Jesus over paths as yet unknown, unto hardships yet undescribed, into circumstances that will have such affect upon our lives that they will change us and make us not like we have planned but like He has planned?

When Jesus began His work He was relatively poor, politically powerless and socially an outcast (His mother already pregnant before marriage). "Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor" (II Cor. 8:9). So He entered the world in poverty. He was sent into the midst of His enemies to be despised and rejected. Then He said, "Even so send I you." The apostles were called away from the world's security and sent like sheep into the midst of wolves. They lived under the tyranny of a decaying and corrupt Roman empire and suffered the hatred of their countrymen, the Jews. There were many burning issues: independence, slavery, economy, severe persecution. Their very survival was at issue. Yet they believed that by following Christ, these issues would be resolved, that they would be supplied with the necessities of life for as long as their services were required by the Lord. This was discipleship.

Discipleship is not a popular theme. When Jesus began to teach it and to bear down on the price, John reports that many walked no more with Him. It requires a certain type of obedience that is hard. Scripture tells us that Jesus learned obedience through the things that He suffered (Heb. 5:8). To follow Him means we learn the same kind of obedience.

The modern church preaches a cross without the offense of the cross. Much of the modern ministry is success-oriented and thinks mainly in terms of spectator approval. Contrast such a concept with that of Paul, who described his first appearance before Caesar in these words, "No man stood with me, but all men forsook me." Churches like for their preachers to be popular in the world.

The church has followed the world in making size and noise the standard of greatness, using such slogans as “Go where the crowd goes...” At times when Jesus had crowds following Him, He preached them away with strong doctrines of discipleship. He wanted disciples, not joiners.

The popular church dares not insist upon discipleship. To confess Christ, to have a testimony of some kind of experience, to subscribe to the approved doctrine of a particular party, to be faithful — yes, to be present at the prescribed meetings, this is usually sufficient for one to be dubbed “faithful” — all this is desired by the church.

But how often does the evangelist instruct the audience to count the cost and consider the sacrifices that will be demanded if they should decide to follow Jesus. Instead, the whole audience is instructed to bow their heads and shut their eyes. If someone is going to make a stand for Jesus, he’s going to be able to do it without the embarrassment of being gazed upon, even by Christian brethren. Furthermore, instead of making his decision to do God’s will under the pressure of opposition and in the solitude of a Gethsemene, he is encouraged by a great emotional crescendo of voices in the invitational hymn. Had the rich young ruler come to the modern evangelist in one of the great campaigns and said, “What must I do to have eternal life?” he would have been told, “Simply bow your head and utter this prayer that says ‘Jesus, come into my heart’ and — Ergo! — you are saved, in the kingdom with the assurance of eternal life and all your riches are still intact to use as you see fit.” Of course some of his money might go to a church which would name its chapel after him and he would be the featured speaker on special occasions.

We are not suggesting that the Christian become an isolationist, that discipleship means withdrawing from the world. Rather it means treating the world as Jesus did, following Him in the world, living for Him and not for the world. It means to confront the world with a Christ-way of life as opposed to the popular lifestyles.

The rich ruler failed to become our example of discipleship. Instead, we are told to look to Abraham who is the father of the faithful. Here is discipleship: Abraham the disciple of God. Isaac had been born miraculously in Abraham’s old age. Were he to die without any children, what would become of the promise of God? All of Abraham’s ambition, all the promises, all the future lay in Isaac, and yet God ordered Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah. How could he tie Isaac to the altar and raise the knife to put to death this child of promise? There is only one answer — Abraham believed and had faith in the goodness of God. He was a follower of God. God would not command anything of Abraham that was not absolutely good. Abraham would obey these commands, knowing that this was the way to please God and to find success, the ultimate and eternal success that can be found only in doing the will of God.

The vast number of celebrities of our day claiming “born again” status have placed the church in the limelight. The world wants to know if all these born again people are true disciples. More than that, the church stands on trial before God. “For the time is come for judgment to begin at the house of God” (I Peter 4:17). Are we merely seeking to build great houses of worship filled with warm bodies, then hang Christian labels on the? Rather we must obey the command to make disciples whose ambition is to be like Christ and who are willing, after carefully counting the cost, to see the old man and the old life put to death, that they might rise to a new life, a life which might appear ridiculous in the

eyes of the world but which will be in conformity to the example set by the Author of life, Jesus Christ the Lord.

Discipleship requires faith, the kind of faith that makes one seriously count the cost, then willing, obediently and even joyfully turn his back upon the fashion of the world, and without a backward glance at the loss of what the world holds dear, follow Jesus.

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