

## WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT DISCIPLESHIP

(Taken and adapted from 'The Red Bits – A Study Guide' by Michael Button)

### Introduction

When we looked at what Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God, we concluded that the primary meaning of the expression is the rule of God in the hearts of men and women who give their allegiance to Him. This is an individual decision. As individuals, those who follow Christ become His disciples. Today we shall be looking at what Jesus taught about discipleship – what it means as individuals to follow Him.

Subsequently we shall be looking at the corporate body of disciples that Jesus called around Him, which we know as *The Church*. Jesus recognised that, until He comes again, those who belong to His Kingdom must live in and interact with the kingdoms of this world. Read part of Jesus' prayer for His disciples, in John 17:14-18. It is clear from this prayer that Jesus did not, as a rule, intend Christians to live isolated lives out of view of the wider society. Rather they should identify themselves as His people and seek to influence society in His Name (*read* Matt 5:13-16). Today we shall see how Jesus wants the invisible, spiritual Kingdom of God to be manifested in the visible Church and active in the social responsibility of its people.

**1. What are Disciples?** The first use of the word of *disciples* in Scripture is in Isaiah 8 verse 16, where Isaiah mentions *my disciples*. In the Second Book of Kings we read of *the sons of the prophet*, who followed an earlier prophet, Elijah.<sup>1</sup> In New Testament times, some Pharisees claimed to be disciples of Moses. The Pharisees, rabbis and John the Baptist had their own disciples who followed them.<sup>2</sup> Some Greek philosophers of the day also had their disciples, and from an analysis of the Greek word used to describe them – *mathétés*, meaning 'learner' – we learn that disciples are to be *learners both in thought and endeavour*.<sup>3</sup>

We usually think of Jesus' disciples as the twelve He appointed to be with Him during His ministry, but these are better described as *apostles* – disciples who were appointed to a special role of mission and leadership.<sup>4</sup> The Twelve were not the only disciples, for Luke refers to a *crowd* of His disciples, distinguishing them from the *great multitude* who crowded around Jesus.<sup>5</sup> This gives us a hint that not all who come to Jesus go on to follow Him. Some were coming for what they could receive from Him (healing and deliverance from evil spirits) and not out of commitment to Him and to His teaching. In fact, some who apparently started out as His disciples later left Him when His teaching became more challenging (*read* John 6:66-67).

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Kings 2:15.

<sup>2</sup> John 9:28; Mark 2:18.

<sup>3</sup> See *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.<sup>b</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Luke 6:13.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 6:17-19.

We refer to the position of being a disciple as *discipleship*, which we may describe as *being a learner and follower*. We shall now explore what Jesus taught about this exciting, though challenging, role.

**2. Discipleship is by invitation.** When Jesus chose the twelve, He called them individually to be with Him (*read* Mark 3:13-19; Mark 1:16-20 and John 15:16). That is not to say we cannot be disciples if we have not heard Jesus speak to us personally. Some disciples who were not among the twelve came to Jesus without being asked, such as Nicodemus, who came under the cover of darkness, and the Ethiopian eunuch, who was seeking the truth and asked to be baptised.<sup>6</sup> Jesus will not turn away anyone who is sincere in seeking to be His disciple. Indeed the desire to seek Jesus comes from a call of God, whether we are aware of it or not (*read* John 6:44 & 10:29).

**3. Disciples follow Jesus' teaching and example.** We cannot follow Jesus physically, like the twelve during His earthly ministry, since Jesus is no longer physically in one place. However, *following* means more than this. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus probably did not travel with Jesus, but they courageously showed their allegiance to Him at a time when the twelve who had travelled with Him had deserted Him for fear of the Jews (*read* John 19:38-42). Jesus told Peter to follow Him even though He was shortly to ascend into heaven and would no longer be physically present (*read* John 21:19).

These, along with we who were born in a later generation, can follow Jesus in the ways He told us:

(i) Obeying His teaching. The main purpose of this course is to learn the teaching He wants us to obey.

Activity 1: Read the following verses and answer the questions:  
Matt 7:24; John 14:23; John 15:10 & 14

(a) Who is wise? \_\_\_\_\_

(b) What is the natural outcome of love for Jesus? \_\_\_\_\_

(c) What shows we are abiding in the love in Jesus? \_\_\_\_\_

(d) What does Jesus call those who obey Him? \_\_\_\_\_

(ii) Following His example. Particularly in:

- Servanthood (*read* John 13:12-16 and Mark 9:33-37).
- Humility (*read* Matt 23:8-12 and Phil 2:5-8).
- Love (*read* John 13:34).

(iii) Becoming like Him (*read* Matt 10:25a). The surest test of a disciple's devotion to the teaching and practices of his or her master is to want to be like him in

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<sup>6</sup> John 3:2 & Acts 8:36.

understanding and practice. A disciple who loves Jesus will want to be like Him in character and deed.

(iv) Maintaining His mission. During His earthly ministry, Jesus could only be in one place at a time, but He sent His disciples to towns and villages with a similar message and mission to His own (*read* Matt 10:5-7 and Luke 10:1 in conjunction with Matt 4:17). His last direction to His disciples before ascending to heaven was to continue this mission to the whole world. It is down to us disciples of today to maintain this mission, enabled by the same Holy Spirit as empowered the early disciples (*read* Matt 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8).

**4. Discipleship requires ongoing faith** (*read* John 14:1). Faith is more than a mental assent. Faith is tested by how far we trust Jesus to be true in what He claims and teaches, especially when His way might seem to be failing. Jesus foresaw that the faith of the Twelve would not stand up to the test of His apparent defeat in His arrest and crucifixion (*read* John 16:31-32). We have the benefit of knowing how Jesus' claims were vindicated in the victory of His resurrection, but our faith may be tested by other promises of Jesus that do not seem to be coming to fruition. We should take encouragement from the resurrection and hold firmly to our trust in all that Jesus has told us.

**5. The cost of discipleship** (*read* Matt 10:25 & John 15:20). Jesus never promised it would be easy to follow Him. He expected His disciples would be treated as He was treated – which was not too well as far as His treatment by unbelievers was concerned. Jesus told His disciples they would have tribulation in the world, though He added the comforting assurance that He would be with them through it all (*read* John 16:33). Several times Jesus warned of what to expect from a world that is hostile to Him and to His disciples.

Activity 2: Read the following warnings and note the assurances that Jesus gives in each case:

(a) Matt 10:17-20. Those on trial and badly treated will be given

\_\_\_\_\_.

(b) Matt 24:9-13 Those killed for their faith will be

\_\_\_\_\_.

(c) Luke 21:16-18. Those persecuted by their family and hated by all will be

\_\_\_\_\_.

(d) Rev 2:10. Those imprisoned for their allegiance will be given

\_\_\_\_\_.

Disciples may be tempted to yield to this pressure to conform to the world's ways and standards, but in that respect they are to remain separate from the world, forsaking all that might get in the way of following Jesus. He likened the cost to bearing a cross. A would-be disciple must therefore count the cost before entering into this relationship with Jesus (*read* Luke 14:26-33).

**Activity 3:** Read Mark 10:29-30 and fill in the gaps in the following statement:

Those who have given up all to be disciples will be persecuted but will receive \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

**6. The blessings of discipleship.** It might appear, from what we have just studied, that to be a disciple of Jesus is nothing but hardship and trouble. However, there are rewards. Some of these we have seen when we looked at the assurances Jesus gave to those suffering various forms of persecution.<sup>7</sup> Let us also consider the benefits of:

(i) Privileged teaching. Although Jesus often taught the crowds of people, there were times when He took His disciples aside to teach them more intimately. Matthew records six discourses<sup>9</sup> that were given specifically to the disciples.<sup>8</sup> This gave the disciples the opportunity to ask Jesus to clarify things they did not understand, or to question Him about things He had not told them (*read* Matt 13:36 & Acts 1:6). The Lord's Prayer was given in response to a request from the disciples to be taught how to pray.<sup>9</sup> (We shall be looking at the Lord's Prayer in a later Study.)

Although we cannot physically sit at the feet of Jesus in our time, we have instead the Holy Spirit, Who was sent by Jesus to be our teacher (*read* John 14:26). We can always ask the Holy Spirit to give us understanding or the wisdom we lack (*read* James 1:5).

(ii) Knowledge and ability to live the true way (*read* John 15:3). As we receive Jesus' teaching and put it into practice, we are able to live in accordance with God's will.

(iii) The blessing of God (*read* Matt 25:34).

(iv) The bond of love (*read* John 13:34-35). Jesus does, of course, love all people. But there is a special bond between Him and His disciples, as well as a bond between disciples. As we saw earlier,<sup>10</sup> Jesus calls His obedient disciples His friends.

(v) To be united with Jesus and to become fruitful as a result (*read* John 15:4-8).

(vi) To be channels of a blessing to others (*read* Mark 9:41). What a privilege it is to so represent Jesus that He blesses those who bless us because we belong to Him!

**Activity 4:** Circle the letter before each true statement:

<sup>7</sup> Activities 2 & 3.

<sup>8</sup> Beginning Matt 5:1, 10:1, 13:10, 18:1, 23:1 & 24:1.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 11:1.

<sup>10</sup> John 15:4. *cf* Para. A.2.

- (a) A disciple should not expect any reward this side of heaven.
- (b) Jesus' disciples will always be protected from the persecutions suffered by Jesus.
- (c) Some disciples might be killed for their faith.
- (d) Non-Christians might be rewarded for helping a disciple of Jesus.
- (e) We cannot ask for understanding today because Jesus is no longer here to tell us.

*For reflection:* We have seen that a disciple is to become like Jesus.<sup>11</sup> In what ways do you think we ought to resemble Jesus?

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<sup>11</sup> Para. 3 (iii).