

A Disciple of Jesus

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One of the struggles that we face as children of God is the struggle to assert our identity in the midst of a world that is confused or actively hostile. This is apparent even in some of the words we use to describe ourselves. For instance, when we call ourselves “Christians” to others, that often bewilders as much as it enlightens. Angela Ramiro was telling me about a month or so ago about a conversation she had with her friend. The friend asked what religion she was, Angela replied “Christian”, and the friend said, “Me too!” and then said she was a member of such and such denomination. These days, I’m reluctant to call myself a Christian to an outsider, because of the confusion it causes.

Some of this confusion exists even within our own minds. As much as we use it, the word “Christian” doesn’t appear much in Scripture. In fact, from beginning to end of the New Testament, it is only used three times. Now, that’s not to say that we shouldn’t call ourselves Christians or think of ourselves as Christians. It’s obviously correct to do so. However, the very sparseness of Biblical material on the subject leaves the term open to a lot of interpretation on our part. I fear that many brethren believe that a Christian is someone who goes to church on Sunday morning at a church that says “Church of Christ” on the sign out front. That belief is neither useful nor Biblically accurate.

In many ways, it is more useful for us to think of ourselves as disciples. In fact, this is the term that the Scripture itself prefers. As we said earlier, “Christian” and its variants are used three times in the New Testament, but “disciple” and its variants are used 263 times. As a result, the word’s picture of what a disciple is is much more detailed, and it’s not a term that has been much distorted either by the outside world or by ourselves. If we think of ourselves as disciples, it gives us a fresh and powerful perspective on our faith. Let’s look at what it means, then, to be a disciple of Jesus.

General Attitudes.

The first and most distinctive feature of discipleship is that a disciple **LEARNS FROM JESUS**. Jesus Himself sets this forth as a general rule in Luke 6:40. This means, then, that the object of our discipleship is to learn everything that Jesus has to teach us so that we can become like Him. It’s not enough for us to reach the spiritual plateau of the churchgoer and stop there. Instead, we have to climb the mountain of spiritual achievement. Day by day, year by year, we have to learn more about the teaching and life of Jesus, and put those things into practice in our own lives.

In many ways, this is like climbing an actual mountain. It’s my experience, at least, that when I’m on a trail up the mountainside, there are all kinds of ridges and secondary peaks that fool me into thinking I’m almost at the crest. When I get to the top of the secondary peak, I see still more mountainside stretching up in front of me. That’s the way that true discipleship is. We’re working on a spiritual problem in our lives, and we think to ourselves, “Once I’ve got this failing out of the way, I’ll be pretty close to where God wants me to be.” Then, we actually conquer that sin, but after we look around for a second, we realize that we’ve still got a whole bunch of other things we need to be working on. If we are true disciples, we will constantly have something to work on. If we don’t, we aren’t actually learning from Jesus.

In his learning, the disciple of Jesus **IS HUMBLE**. Paul defines this in Philippians 2:3-5. As Paul’s words make clear, this isn’t just humility toward God, although that is certainly involved. It’s humility toward everyone. It’s learning to be unconcerned about ourselves and our reputation. It’s learning to ignore offenses to our fragile dignity. It’s learning to care more about others and what they want than about ourselves and what we want. It’s learning to possess the mind that Christ had when He gave up the throne of heaven to come to earth and live and die for us.

As part of this, we must learn to put aside the self-righteousness that is so common among brethren. It’s easy for us to fall into the trap of focusing on others and their failures and their shortcomings, and making it our personal mission to whip them into shape. It’s easy for us to sneer down at others from what we perceive as the lofty pinnacle of our spiritual achievement. That way of thinking will land us in hell quicker than anything, because it blinds us to our own weaknesses and repels others from wanting to follow Christ. When we work with others, we must keep in mind that we too are sinners, and no less in need of the grace of Jesus than they. That will cram our pride back down where it belongs.

One of the primary signs of the disciple’s humility is that he **OBEYS**. Paul continues on to describe the obedience of Jesus in Philippians 2:8. It does require humility to obey, to say to God, “OK, God, this isn’t what I want to do at all, but You’ve told me that it’s what I need to do, and You’re in charge and You know better than I do anyway.” Jesus took this obedience so far that He allowed Himself to be crucified because it was what God wanted.

Likewise, if we don’t work to obey in everything, it isn’t really obedience. We don’t get to partition our lives, to put some sins over in a corner and say that we’re going to obey God and not practice them, but then cuddle up close with the sins that we really like. We don’t submit to God’s authority when we say no to adultery but yes to gossip. Instead, we reject it. God’s list of sins that He hates and our list of sins that we hate need to be the same list. Otherwise, we’re not genuine disciples. We’re like the people in the time of the judges, who did whatever was right in their own eyes.

Of course, as the necessary adjunct to learning obedience, the disciple **KNOWS AND USES THE WORD**. We see just how adept Jesus was with the Scripture in Matthew 4:2-4. It's not like Satan came to Him the day before and said, "Now Jesus, tomorrow I'm going to tempt You to use Your powers to feed Yourself, so tonight's Your big chance to study up and learn what You should say in response." Instead, this was a spiritual pop quiz, the way it is for all of us. Jesus was able to respond so quickly and effectively because He knew the word as thoroughly as it could be known.

Is that true of us? What will we do tomorrow if the devil springs some new temptation on us, or some friend or co-worker brings up a spiritual topic? Will we be able to say "It is written", or will we stumble and bumble around, with only the vaguest notion of what the right answer is? We need to do better than that, and the only way to get better than that is through study. Not all of us have a photographic memory, but it is true for every one of us that the more time we spend with the word, the more we will know, and the more we know, the more effective we will be in the Lord's work.

Specific Applications.

Throughout that work, one of the hallmarks of the disciple is that he **HAS COMPASSION**. The compassion of Christ is evident in Matthew 9:35-36. One of the things that we often fail to grasp about the ministry of Jesus is just how exhausting it was. Hordes of people came to Jesus day and night, seeking every kind of physical and spiritual help. Even when He wanted most to be alone, they never let Him alone. This must have taken a tremendous toll on Him, but He kept going and never complained, and His compassion was one of the biggest reasons why. He simply wasn't capable of standing by and seeing others suffer when He knew He had the means to help.

Too often, we do a better job of imitating the hard-heartedness of the Pharisee than the compassion of the Christ. I'm guilty of this myself. Oftentimes, when I hear some story about people in a hard situation, I go through and analyze the circumstances, point out the mistakes that they made, come to the conclusion that it's their own fault, and don't feel the least bit sorry for them. That's a terrible way to think! The Bible promises that we will receive mercy from God according to the mercy we show others, and if God has compassion on me only when He thinks I deserve it, I'm dead meat. It is perilous for us to feel no compassion for others when we rely on God's compassion for us.

Because of his compassion, the disciple **DOES GOOD**. This was one of the defining traits of the ministry of Jesus, as we see from Peter's words in Acts 10:37-38. Jesus didn't just sit around, filled with warm glowy feelings of compassion, and do nothing. Instead, His compassion shaped His actions. He helped wherever He could, and never turned away anyone who wanted that help. He was dedicated to relieving the sufferings of others.

This too is an area where many of us have a lot to learn. We spend a lot of time talking about how it isn't part of the work of the church to help the general poor, and it isn't, but I fear that a lot of us have drawn the conclusion that it isn't our individual role to help those outside the church either. That could not be more wrong. We are especially to care for the household of faith, but we are also to do good for all men. This is going to cost us. It's going to cost us money, it's going to cost us time, it's going to cost us mental and emotional energy. We will be worn out from all the good we do, just as Jesus was worn out from all He did. However, we can find rest in the assurance that we are imitating Him.

The most powerful good that the disciple does, though, is when he **TEACHES OTHERS**. This was evident from the very beginning of His ministry, as we see in Mark 1:14-15. As impressive as His miracles were, they were just a sideshow to His real work, which was proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. He knew that His touch had the power to heal men's bodies, but only His message had the power to heal men's souls. That was most important to Him.

This too is an area where Christians frequently struggle, and often, the failures here stem from failures in other areas of discipleship. We don't teach because we don't know what to say, and we don't know what to say because we don't study the word. We don't teach because we lack compassion for the lost, because we are indifferent to their suffering in this life and the prospect of even greater suffering in the life to come. Jesus was never like that, and if we are truly committed to following Him, we won't be like that either. It's not easy for us to tell others about the gospel, but neither was it easy for Jesus. In fact, it was so not-easy that He was crucified for teaching the truth. However, He risked persecution and death because His message was so important. It's no less important today. Let's act accordingly.

Often, because of his teaching and his commitment to righteousness, a disciple **ENDURES SUFFERING**. Peter explores this idea in 1 Peter 2:20-21. As Peter says, the suffering under discussion here isn't the suffering we bring on ourselves by being evil. It's the suffering we endure even when we do good. This can arise in any number of areas. We can suffer because we are struck down by some calamity we did not invite. We can suffer for the same reasons Peter gives here, when we have an evil boss who makes our lives miserable even though we're working hard and doing our best. Finally, we can suffer for standing out, for daring to be a light for Christ in the darkness of the world.

Whichever of these kinds of suffering we face, we must learn to endure it with patience. We don't get to lash out at God for what we think He's done to us, or at our evil employer for mistreating us. The circumstances should never lead us to compromise on our principles. We must uphold the highest standards of godly conduct, neither speaking nor acting in an unrighteous way, regardless of the provocation. Only then do we find the favor of God.