

Devotion & Commitment

Essential in true Christian discipleship

Many of us have had the privilege of being born and raised in a Christian home. We go to correct Christian meetings, we read the Bible and we sing the hymns. We feel we are in the right place doing the right things... and yet, something is missing. Occasionally, in moments of introspection, we worry at the insipid emotion that accompanies our Christian way of life. It feels so different from the excitement and satisfaction which invades us as we make progress in our studies or climb the company ladder. It differs so much from that freshness and anticipation as we book our next exotic holiday or come home with a new electronic gadget. Is our Christian dullness normal? Is our version of Christianity genuine? Are we correct in calling ourselves "disciples of Jesus Christ"?

What is a disciple of Jesus?

To be a disciple is to be a learner, one who follows a teacher and submits to his teaching. In the New Testament the term "disciple" is used about 270 times. It should not be used interchangeably with "saved", "saint" or "born again Christian". In a wide sense, it is used to refer to people who walked along with Jesus or who were positively inclined towards Him (John 6:66; 19:38). Sometimes it is used exclusively of his 12 followers (Luke 22:11). It is also used to identify those with greater commitment to Christ. We find male and female disciples (Acts 9:10, 36). Probably in scorn, the disciples were first called "Christians" around AD44 (Acts 11:26) – a term only used 3 times in the New Testament. It is only from the second century onwards that the name "Christian" was accepted by believers as a title of honour. In his writings, the apostle Paul never uses words disciple or Christian.

Doctor Luke tells the story where Jesus explains what He expects of one of His disciples (Luke 14:25-35). That day, many people had set aside their work and occupations to learn and show support to the teachings of the LORD Jesus. Were they really disciples? What was their degree of commitment? Jesus turns to the crowd of easy followers and shocks them, He puts before them three basic conditions.

1. Jesus – the one I love most

"If any *man* come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (v. 26). Scriptures promote family values. Clearly we are not called to despise our family members. The term "hate" is used in a relative way (Matthew 10:37). Among the different people we know, we naturally love some more than others. What Jesus is saying is that unless we love Him more deeply and more strongly than any other, we cannot be His disciple. The Lord Jesus claims that supreme place in our heart and affections. What place does Jesus have in your heart?

2. Jesus – my top priority

"And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (v. 27). In those days, under Roman occupation, those who carried their cross had only a few hours left to live. What would go through the mind of a man as he carried his cross? He would experience a deep change in priorities. That family dispute over an inheritance would seem so insignificant now. His diplomas, bank accounts, and social standing would become so worthless. His expected harvest, his business projections and retirement plans would be so irrelevant now. To carry one's cross is to live the present aware of death and eternity. To carry one's cross willingly is to surrender our perceived rights. The cross changes our values and priorities. It is not wrong to plan, to dream, to aspire. What Jesus is saying is that unless He is the top priority in our life, above our personal dreams and aspirations, we cannot be His disciple. What dream or force is driving your life?

3. Jesus – my most valuable possession

"So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple" (v. 33). Does this a statement condemn private property? No. The issue is our attitude towards what we own. We are provisional administrators of God's blessings, never absolute owners. We are born naked, and we carry nothing with us when we leave. Yet during these few decades of life, it is amazing how tightly we can hold on to material things. For some it is a car, a house or a share portfolio. For others it is a Laptop, some clothing or a music collection. What do you possess that brings you great satisfaction? Jesus says that unless we value Him above any of our possessions, we cannot be His disciple.

Saltiness

We know that our salvation is a gift from God. We cannot earn it. We humbly and gratefully receive it. The LORD Jesus is not setting out the conditions for salvation. He is clearly pointing out the attitude required for normal Christian living. The expression "he cannot be my disciple", reaffirmed by our Lord three times, adds great force to this standard. Modern Christianity allows for much more flexibility. Many seem to be satisfied because they follow church traditions, are baptized, or because we go to what they consider doctrinally correct meetings. Does our life style differ significantly from the materialists, humanists and pleasure-lovers that surround us? Of course, there is nothing wrong in creating wealth, helping fellow humans or having some fun. But the standard Jesus is calling for generates a completely different outlook on life.

The appeal is not to look like salt, but to be salt. To have savour, to influence, to transform, to have saltiness (v. 34). This commitment to the LORD Jesus must express itself in the details of the way we live. And what if we fail? Sadly we do! We must never forget the GRACE of God. As born again Christians we are now children of God. We are accepted and deeply loved by the LORD unconditionally. Our successes and our failures do not make Him love us more or love us less. His love for us is constant and our salvation is secure. Why, then, does the LORD call for such a high standard of devotion?

Building a tower, fighting a war

As He set out his three conditions for true discipleship, Jesus paints two pictures in the minds of his audience. First that of a constructor who would like to build a tower (v. 28-30), then that of a king who considers war against another king (v. 31-32). The builder and the king should look at their goal and consider what they need to achieve it. We could understand these pictures as a call to consider the cost of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Salvation is a free gift from God, but it involves the breaking of our pride and stubborn will. Are we willing to pay such a price? Are we looking for an easier version Christianity? Perhaps we could also look at these pictures from another angle. We know that the LORD currently has a goal: the building His church. You and I are “lively stones”. In stating these conditions, the LORD is pointing to the desired quality of the building blocks. We know that we are currently engaged in a spiritual war. These three conditions reflect the degree of commitment Jesus demands of His soldiers. If Jesus is not the one we love most, at some critical point we shall deny Him to please another. If Jesus is not my top priority, at some critical point we shall refuse His leading and follow our dream. If Jesus is not my most valuable possession, at some critical point we shall reject His cause to protect our investment.

Take it or leave it!

Our Lord Jesus is not what we today would call “politically correct”. In fact, He is sometimes quite radical, provocative and confrontational. He would not change his eating company or postpone a miracle to avoid offending the religious. He would speak openly about enemies, adultery, divorce and religious hypocrisy. He would not dilute His words to satisfy His audience or to increase the number of followers. In the gospel of John chapter 6 we find Jesus encouraging a move away from shallowness towards a deeper relationship and devotion. On hearing him, many exclaimed “This is an hard saying; who can hear it?” (v. 60). How do you feel about the high standard set by Jesus? Many were attracted to the warm personality of Jesus. Many followed Jesus for material benefits or in need of a miracle. But when Jesus called for deeper involvement, many “went back, and walked no more with him” (v. 66). How do leaders feel when their followers start to walk away? Does Jesus also have a cheaper, less demanding version of Christianity on offer? Is Jesus now willing to negotiate a special deal with his closest friends so that they would not leave Him? As Jesus looks upon the backs of those who wander off into the distance, He turns to the remaining Twelve and asks: “Will ye also go away?” (v. 67). They were also free to turn and depart. Although they were His closest friends, Jesus would not lower the

standard to retain them. Let's make no mistake, that high standard of devotion to Jesus is still necessary today.

What's the alternative?

Each of us has a motor inside. There is something that drives us, something that makes us get up in the morning, something that spurs us on to study and work hard. That something inspires creativity and makes us willing to sacrifice. The motor can be a striving for comfort, security, recognition or success. It can be a fleeing from fear, insignificance or emptiness. What is the driving force in your life? What moves you on? The apostle Peter pondered the options before him. Was Jesus asking too much? Should he also leave Jesus and follow the departing crowd? He looked at Jesus and answered: "Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 68, 69). What or who else is worthy of that central place in our hearts and lives today? The LORD Jesus is not calling Christians to separate from normal social interaction and hide in monasteries. But He calls for a radical internal change. You will no longer see yourself as a mother, an engineer or a nurse who happens to be a Christian. You shall see yourself as a Christian who happens to be a mother, an engineer or a nurse. This devotion to Jesus does not make people eccentric or detached from this world. When Jesus is the passion of our hearts, life takes its proper perspective. We are better students, better workers, better neighbors, better children, better parents, better Christians. Only the centrality of Jesus leads to a healthy balanced life.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ gave His life in order to redeem a people that would then belong to Him. Salvation is now offered freely to any who would repent, believe and give their life to Jesus. Salvation is a gift; the Christian life is a challenge. If we are to be useful to our Master, if we are to be true disciples of the LORD Jesus, something inside us must break. When Abraham showed he was more devoted to God than to his son, he received his son back. But in the process, the LORD broke something inside Abraham. Have you reached brokenness before God? Do you still hold something back? We must purposefully surrender our own plans and dreams - we must take up our cross, and set Jesus at the centre of our hearts. How did the apostle Paul manage to keep going, with joy, under such adverse circumstances? He was devoted and committed to a person: "For to me to live *is* Christ" Philippians 1:21. Surely the LORD Jesus is still worth it!

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