

CHAPTER 23

BECOMING A DISCIPLE OF JESUS CHRIST - SOME INTRODUCTORY POINTS

⁶ So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.
Colossians 2:6-7 (NIV)

³⁴And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. ³⁵"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶"For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? ³⁷"For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"
Mark 8:34-37 (NASB)

Another neglected and unfashionable aspect of Christianity is the process of becoming a “disciple”. Much of modern Western evangelism, (i.e. telling people about the gospel), consists of little more than inviting you to “make a decision for Christ” and to “invite Jesus Christ into your heart”. These modern, man-made phrases are not found anywhere in the Bible. However, having done these things, many people are then immediately urged to regard themselves as Christians, and not to doubt that they are saved. But they may not be.

To make it even worse, very often such people are not told that they need to become disciples. They are led to believe that the job is finished at conversion. In fact, it has only just begun. Jesus is calling us to become not just converts, but disciples. And, He wants us to continue as disciples, growing and maturing and bearing fruit until the day we die.

A disciple is someone who follows in the footsteps of another person in order to become like them. Therefore a disciple of Jesus is someone who diligently follows Jesus Christ with a view to becoming like Him. In Old Testament Judaism, Rabbis would travel around Israel and young men would attach themselves to them by literally following them on foot. They would then learn from that Rabbi as he travelled the country teaching and preaching. They would also help the Rabbi and gain knowledge of the Scriptures. They would also learn how to teach and preach, plus many other practical skills, by following, watching and imitating.

God is looking for people who are totally committed

Becoming a real Christian is similar. It must involve a serious and genuine commitment to become a devoted disciple or follower of Jesus Christ, in every part of our lives. We cannot be just a fan or spectator. When we make that decision to follow Jesus we need to do so in the way that He meant us to. Jesus wants us to do far more than simply *agree* with Him or even believe in Him. He also wants us to hand our entire lives over to Him and to follow after Him with total commitment:

When they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.
Luke 5:11 (NASB)

For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him
2 Chronicles 16:9 (NIV)

That type of commitment is what we need if we are to get mature and become sanctified. And it is largely on the basis of our commitment that we can qualify to be rewarded by Him at the Judgment Seat of Christ. It is also how we stay loyal to Jesus and continue as His disciples.

God is looking for men and women that He can rely on and who will, if necessary, stand alone and obey God even when times are hard and dangerous. But such people are very rare:

"I searched for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one. ***Ezekiel 22:30 (NASB)***

I am reminded of a famous quotation from D.L. Moody, a 19th century evangelist concerning the rarity of real commitment and the fact that even the most committed believers are not 100% committed:

"The world has yet to see what God can do with, and for, and through, and in, and by, the man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him. I will do my utmost to be that man".

(D.L. Moody)

I don't suppose that even D.L. Moody quite managed a 100% score in the end but, judging by the extraordinary fruit that his life produced, he did very well. Why don't you accept that challenge in your life? Resolve to do away with anything that distracts you from your central purpose of obeying and following Jesus Christ as His disciple. Bear as much fruit for Him as you possibly can. Let that become your lifetime goal and your central focus. Keep it always at the forefront of your mind.

We are supposed to be following Jesus

We are meant to learn from Jesus and to seek to become like Him. We are then to do the work that He is doing, by joining in alongside Him. Remember that Jesus Christ is not only our Saviour. He is also our Lord. That means that Jesus has a unique status and authority. He has many titles and is many things all at the same time. He is Divine. He is the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God. He is the Word of God. He is the Messiah of Israel. He is the King of Israel. In addition He is the King of the entire earth.

There are very many other titles given to Jesus as well. He is the "Prince of Peace", the "Morning Star", the "Son of David", the "Son of Man" (from Daniel chapter seven), and many others.

It is like where a senior aristocrat and member of the royal family has many different titles and ranks. For example, Prince Charles is the Prince of Wales and at the same time he is the Duke of Cornwall. He has many other aristocratic and military titles as well, such as the Earl of Chester, Duke of Rothesay and the Earl of Carrick. Jesus' many titles show that He has the most immense rank and importance. Because of that we are not only to worship Him, but to follow Him, and obey Him.

You will never understand why you need to be His disciple unless you grasp how extraordinarily powerful and important He is as our Creator, Saviour, King and Judge. These magnificent titles and names that Jesus has show how indescribably important He is. One day, everybody who has ever lived will have to bow down to Him, whether they want to or not. You would be better off to do it now, of your own free choice, rather than be forced to do so later.

We are to regard Jesus as our King because that's what He is

We are meant to treat Jesus Christ as a King. He is entitled to our complete loyalty and faithfulness, in the same way that in medieval times a man would show 'fealty' and allegiance to an earthly king. Jesus is not a democratically elected politician. He is the King as of right. Moreover He is the King of kings, Lord of lords and Name above all names. He has been appointed to that unique position on the basis of merit by God the Father. There is nobody higher than Him. He also shares the throne of God the Father in Heaven and He rules over the whole universe.

Moreover, when He returns to the earth He will be the King of the earth and will sit on King David's throne. We are not discussing a politician that we can vote in and vote out. Jesus is unique and worthy of the utmost respect, reverence and awe.

A more accurate picture of what Jesus is really like

However, for a fuller picture of what Jesus is like, look at these descriptions of Him in the book of Daniel and then in the book of Revelation. These show us a glimpse of Him as He really is. This is how we will one day know Him, when He is seen in His full glory. Once these facts become real to us we will be better able to follow Jesus in the way we should:

¹³ "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of Heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Daniel 7:13-14(NIV)

¹¹I saw Heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. ¹²His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. ¹³He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. ¹⁴The armies of Heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. ¹⁵Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron sceptre." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. ¹⁶On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

Revelation 19:11-16 (NIV)

However, now let us go to the other end of the spectrum and consider this quite different description of Jesus Christ. This next passage reveals how far He humbled Himself when He came to the earth for the first time as a man. He put aside all of His glory and majesty. Instead, He went to the very lowest depths in order to save us. It was that willingness on His part to humble Himself that led to God exalting Him to the very highest place:

⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

*⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
⁷but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

*⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—*

even death on a cross!

*⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in Heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Philippians 2:5-11 (NIV)

Jesus Christ commands us to spend the rest of our lives following Him, doing His will, and serving Him with complete loyalty. That is a huge privilege, with many benefits, but it is also a duty. He wants us to lay aside every other competing aim or goal and put Him first above everything else:

²⁴Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. ²⁵"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Matthew 16:24-26 (NASB)

³By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. ⁴The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; ⁵but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: ⁶the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

1 John 2:3-6 (NASB)

But your hearts must be fully committed to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time."

1 Kings 8:61(NIV)

So, being a disciple means putting Him above our family, job, children, wife, country, money and possessions. He must take first place and He must be Lord of your life. He does not put that to you as a suggestion. It is an emphatic command, which He is fully entitled to make. That is what discipleship is really about. It means beginning to see Him as He truly is and to follow Him with total devotion in a way that reflects who He is.

This is a far cry from what much of modern Western Christianity is about. Most of it is dismally lukewarm and half-hearted. There is little or no concept of Jesus Christ being our King. If we are not wholehearted about obeying Jesus, then we will inevitably end up doing wrong and displeasing Him. That is how it works. If we set our hearts to obey and follow Jesus we will grow. If not, we will degenerate:

He did evil because he had not set his heart on seeking the LORD.

2 Chronicles 12:14 (NIV)

People often say words to the effect of "By all means practice your religion, but don't take it too seriously". It has become a cultural expectation in Britain that people should keep quiet and be "moderate" and private about their faith and not go over the top about it or to discuss it openly. We are expected to keep our relationship with Jesus strictly to ourselves, as if He was something to be ashamed of. Above all, we are frowned upon if we get excited about Him. These are pressures which British culture puts on us. But that attitude is not what Jesus wants. He wants us to be passionate about Him and totally loyal.

We must not be ashamed of the Name of Jesus

Also, have you noticed that it is the name of Jesus specifically which unbelievers do not like. Even Christians feel squeamish about using the name of Jesus in front of others. People will fairly happily say the word "God", but not "Jesus". That is a cultural pressure, but we must refuse to be hemmed in by it. We must resolve to speak His name without embarrassment or shame, whoever we are with, or wherever we are.

In Great Britain it is culturally acceptable to show passion about a football team, but not about following Jesus. That may be our culture, but it's still wrong. We need to disobey the pressures of our culture and obey Jesus instead. Let Ezra be your model. Make it your aim to learn God's Word with dedication and to put it into practice in your life:

For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.
Ezra 7:10 (NIV)

The cost of being a genuine disciple - trouble, hardship, persecution and suffering

Let us look now at a long list of passages from the Bible where Jesus, Paul, Peter and John talk frankly about the committed and faithful way in which Jesus wants us to follow Him. We need to be willing to endure hardship, abuse, persecution and suffering for the sake of His name. Consider how different this type of commitment is from the limp and passive way in which most churches now operate in the West:

¹¹"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in Heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
Matthew 5:11-12 (NIV)

"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.
Matthew 6:24(NIV)

"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.
Matthew 24: 9 (NIV)

⁷But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ
Philippians 3:7-8 (NIV)

¹²In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.
2 Timothy 3:12-13(NIV)

For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know.
1 Thessalonians 3:4 (NASB)

¹²Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.
1 Peter 4:12-14(NIV)

This final verse is spoken by Jesus Himself to the lukewarm, half-hearted church at Laodicea:

*¹⁵I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!
¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.
Revelation 3:15-16(NIV)*

I have included a long list of passages about the hardships and cost of discipleship. I could actually have put in many more verses. I included so many because I wanted to demonstrate, beyond all doubt, that this is a consistent biblical theme. I am not exaggerating or taking anything out of context.

We need to therefore follow and obey Jesus with all our heart, not passively or with limits or conditions. This will lead us into suffering, persecution, and maybe even death, for Him and for the sake of His Name. Even so, we must not be ashamed of Him or keep Him hidden out of view.

We must be openly identified with Jesus, even if it costs us. We are bound to attract ridicule, abuse and persecution if we openly follow Him in the way we should. But He commands us to do so, and it is worth it.

Therefore, be willing to swim in the opposite direction from the people around you. Be willing to give up your ambitions, your independence and your comforts to follow Him and be His disciple. You will be hated, insulted and persecuted. But you will also gain from it and you will be rewarded for it eternally. Look at this inspiring comment made by a man called Jim Elliot, who was urging people to give their whole lives to God's service:

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose" - Jim Elliot,

The martyred American missionary, Jim Elliot, was killed at the age of 28 by the Auca Indians in South America to whom he brought the gospel. He was obedient and he paid the ultimate price. So have millions of other martyrs over the centuries, and especially in our own century. Indeed, more Christians are having to die for their faith today than ever before

When Jesus spoke of picking up your cross daily and following Him He meant that the decision to become His disciple was potentially a life or death issue. It may well mean giving up your life, quite literally. That is happening now to Christians all over the world, especially in Islamic countries. At the very least, it means the loss of comfort, privileges and the rulership of our own lives.

That's what real discipleship means. There is no other way. The only question is whether you are willing to pay that price. If you are not, and you want a "nicer," more moderate Christianity, which does not involve such intense commitment, then how can you say you are His disciple? You would be your own disciple, following your own path.

We will never be able to face the ultimate test and be willing to be martyred for Jesus if we have not first learned how to pass the hundreds of little tests that we face along the way. If we can't cope with being criticised or laughed at for His sake, then how can we realistically expect to face death for Him? Likewise, if we can't sacrifice our time or our money for His sake, how can we expect to pass the test of martyrdom?

Therefore we must learn how to be faithful, and how to show courage and endurance. We do so by passing all the small, seemingly insignificant tests along the way. That's why they matter so much. They are your chance to train and to get ready for the big test that may, one day, come to you if you follow Jesus. That's one reason why it makes sense to be thankful when we are persecuted. Opposition strengthens us and gets us ready to face those bigger tests.

Being a committed and diligent disciple has a huge bearing on how we will fare at the Judgment Seat of Christ. It will determine whether Jesus greets us there with approval and rewards, or with rebuke and disapproval. I want His approval and reward very much indeed. I want God to help me now to be willing to pay whatever price is needed in order to please Him, honour Him and be true to Him:

²⁴Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. ²⁷No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.
1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (NIV)

This final chapter is meant to be a brief introduction to the concept of discipleship, i.e. what it is, what it can involve and why it matters. I will develop these themes much more fully in the remaining books in the Real Christianity series. They are all about different aspects of how you can seek to grow in Christian maturity, overcome obstacles and become an effective disciple.

If you have genuinely repented and believed in Jesus, then that is what makes you into a Christian. However, you shouldn't just stop there. You have to grow and go forward or else you will inevitably go backwards, or "*backslide*". You can't stand still as a Christian. It's impossible.

Moreover, if standing still is all that you want, then it raises serious questions about your motives and the genuineness of your belief in Jesus in the first place. How can you say that you believe Jesus is Lord, but not want Him to be the Lord of your life or to follow, obey, and stand up for Him?

At the very least, if you don't want to pay the price and face the pressure and opposition that comes from following Jesus, then it calls into question whether you truly believe in Him and in what He says.

Seize every opportunity that God offers you to serve Him and to grow. The following books in this series are intended to help you to see many of the pitfalls and hazards we will face in our life as a disciple. I aim to show how we can best avoid such problems, become more alert, discerning and wise, and learn how to be an 'overcomer'.

God wants you to win the battles you are going to face and to become a successful, productive, faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. He wants you to bear a lot of fruit so that He can reward you. Conversely, the Devil wants you to fail, to be ineffective, and to bear little or no fruit.

How well you do in each of those battles in your life is largely down to you. It will be decided by the approach you choose to take, the decisions you make and the habits you develop in the years ahead.

So, don't even consider stopping at the point of becoming a new convert. Go on and gladly accept everything God has to offer you. Take your place as an active follower of Jesus. Aim to make a difference in the world and, one day, to hear Him say to you "*Well done, good and faithful servant*".