

Call to Discipleship

Jesus' call to discipleship was radical, demanding a renunciation of all other priorities. Disciples were to give their lives unreservedly to Him. Not only were they to learn from Him, but to come behind, follow, and imitate Him in how they actually lived their lives. They are called to take up their "cross daily" (Luke 9:23) and follow Christ. They are to follow Him regardless of the cost, even if it leads to their death. Jesus is to take priority over all other priorities, even those of family, surrendering all to Him. (Luke 9:57-62). Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount calls disciples to a radical (higher and broader) love, even extending to love of enemies.

In the New Testament there are four primary Greek words that relate to discipleship. The words are: "follow" *akolodtheo*, "disciple" *mathetes*, "imitate" *mimeomai*, and to "come behind" *opiso*. There are numerous studies in theological word books or on the internet of these words. We will not detail here what you can find there. But one of the most striking themes that emerges from this study is the radical contrast between Jesus' discipleship and other forms of discipleship during Jesus' time.

John the Baptist had disciples (Matt. 6:29, Luke 11:1, Mark 2:18, John 3:25). So also the Jewish Rabbis had disciples. The Jews claimed to be disciples of Moses (John 9:25). Mark 2:18 indicates that there were disciples of the Pharisees. What can we learn by studying the contrast between Jesus' discipleship and other approaches of His own day? The answers may be surprising and edifying to you.

When Jesus called his disciples, He did not merely call them to learn (which is one meaning of *mathetes*), but to follow Him unreservedly. They were to deny themselves, pick up their crosses and follow Him (Mark 8:34-38). While Jesus' disciples are called to learn His teaching and give attention to it, His emphasis is on the importance of acting upon it and putting it into practice. In Matthew 7:24-27 Jesus tells the story about two houses, one built on the rock and the other on sand. The one who builds a house on the rock is "one who hears these words of mine and acts on them." That person's life pleases God, withstands all the trials of life and ends in eternal life. The one who builds the house on sand is "one who hears these words of mine and does not act on them." That person's life comes to spiritual ruin.

By contrast the Rabbinic disciples focused on rote memorization of the Rabbis' teaching or of the traditions passed down from other Rabbis. Jesus appealed to the Old Testament Scriptures to which He added His own word that had equal authority: "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35). We need to not only hear and learn Jesus' words but put them into practice. We must act on them.

When a Jewish student wanted to study under a Rabbi, he chose the one who most appealed to him. He would submit to the Rabbi for a period of time but not forever. On the other hand, Jesus' disciples did not choose Him, but He chose them and Jesus' call was not for a limited time but for their whole lives. We have been chosen by Jesus and we are "not our own" but His.

The Jewish Rabbinic student was submitted temporarily to the Rabbi, but could look forward to the day when he would be called "Rabbi" or "Master." On the other

hand, Jesus' disciples will never be the master. They are to live lives of self-sacrifice and service, taking up their cross, facing rejection and persecution, always following Jesus.

In fact Jesus' disciples are never to call themselves "Rabbi" or "Master." These titles are reserved for Jesus alone. Jesus says in Matthew 23:

But do not be called Rabbi, for One is your Teacher and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, he who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted" (Matt. 23:8-12).

Because we have only one Rabbi (Jesus), we are never to put ourselves into the position of being in ultimate authority, as the Rabbis did, judging Scripture rather than being judged by it. They saw themselves as authorities in spiritual matters. Jesus criticizes the Scribes and Pharisees for "seating themselves in the chair of Moses" (Matt. 23:2). We are all to submit ourselves to Him. We have only one Rabbi, namely, Jesus.

Other aspects of being a disciple are to "follow," get "behind," and "imitate" Christ. We are to follow, to get behind Jesus, not ahead of Him as Peter did. When Peter, on hearing Jesus' prophesy of his own suffering, rebuked Him, Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan" (Matt. 16-23). In other words, don't pretend to be the Master, but get behind Me and be my follower. Don't try to lead Me, but follow Me.

Part of what it means to be a disciple is to imitate God (Eph. 5:1). It is helpful to have other people as models or patterns for living, but we need to imitate not personal idiosyncrasies and certainly not flawed, fallen characteristics but the Christ-likeness in

them. Paul enjoins the Philippians to “join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us” (Phil. 3:17). Paul calls the Corinthians to “Be imitators of me, just as I am of Christ” (I Cor. 14:1). When we imitate others, make sure we follow those patterns that are “of Christ.”

Application:

Lest we miss the forest for the trees, let’s review some of the implications of what we have seen in this study:

(1) Jesus called his disciples into a total commitment to Him.

We are not only to learn His teaching, but act on it. We are not only to know but to do what He says.

(2) We are committed to Jesus for the rest of our lives. It’s not like we have chosen to study under a professor for our PhD, but He has chosen us to follow Him.

(3) We will never be the Master. In fact, we are not to call ourselves Rabbi, Father, or Leader.

(4) Call others to follow, get behind, and imitate Jesus.