

Special Section: Following Jesus

Questions I'd Ask Before Following Jesus

What are the risks and rewards of being a disciple?

By Gordon MacDonald

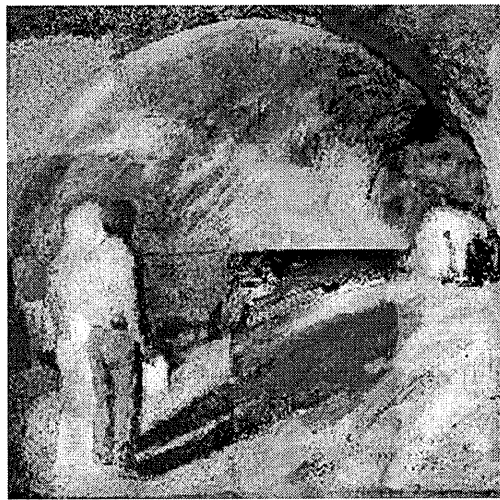


Illustration by Douglas Fryer

I am romanced by airplanes. And part of the attraction has included the dream of possessing a pilot's license. A longtime fantasy: me, screaming down the runway (in a plane, of course) with one hand on the yoke and the other on the throttle. That fantasy is almost 50 years old.

Flying lessons have always remained on life's waiting list for me. There were other, more pressing demands. College, for example, or raising children, or book deadlines, or a church congregation.

Then recently, a friend said, "I own a plane; I'll give you the basic instruction you'll need to get certified for your license." I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Even my dear wife said, "Go for it; you've been talking about this all your life."

Suddenly there were no obstacles between me and my dream. So why did I hesitate? Why a sudden burst of uncertainty?

Questions suddenly arose: Was I really prepared to invest the necessary time? What other priorities would be downsized? How much technical reading (the kind I don't like) would be necessary? How much information to master—about navigation, radios, climate, aerodynamics, technologies, and mechanics? What if I failed? Or succeeded? How often could I fly? And could I (should I) really afford the costs of flying?

The original obstacles had made it unnecessary to face these issues before. I'd never really discussed them with myself.

But here was the knockout punch. I imagined the day when a flight instructor would climb

out of a plane and say to me, “Take her up by yourself. When (if?) you get back, I’ll be here waiting for you.” And I imagined myself up there—afraid to land. And it occurred to me that I loved the idea of flying more than I loved the reality.

Did I really want to break the bonds of earth? I heard myself say, “Nahhhh!”

And instantly a dream died. The will to head for flight school just wasn’t there. The questions had forced unanticipated conclusions. (Kudos to all pilots who are unafraid to land their planes.)

LOOKING BEFORE LEAPING

My reaction to a friend’s kind invitation helped me to appreciate what Simon Peter and friends faced on the Galilean beach when Jesus entered their world and invited them to another kind of flying: the building of the kingdom of God.

I wonder what questions exploded in their minds when they heard the “follow me” challenge? What issues concerned them? Practical questions? Personal questions? Priority questions? Questions about inadequacy? Anxiety? Compensation?

Let me suggest a few they might have asked. They’re the ones I would ask of anyone who invited me on a spiritual journey of this magnitude. The cost of discipleship is enormous. One mustn’t take it on without an interrogation.

You see, sooner or later each would-be disciple stands on something like the beach where Jesus approached Peter, James, and John with His challenge. On that beach we make a choice to follow the Lord and His designated discipler: to reshape life, to realize hidden, heaven-given potential, to become something of an influence, to align with God’s purposes. What do we need to know before we leave our beach and move into motion? Here are some thoughts.

WHY DO YOU WANT ME, WITH ALL MY BAGGAGE?

As far as I know, none of the original disciples came to their beaches with anything of worth from their private pasts. Judas Iscariot may have looked the most promising! For the most part, the Lord’s candidates for apostleship were simple, rural men. A few others seem to have had some sleaze in their resumes. The overall performances and attitudes of the group on several occasions reveal that their earlier character formation left something to be desired. This was no all-star team.

Simon Peter was raising the “baggage” issue when he said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8). Jesus’ response: “Don’t be afraid” (Luke 5:10).

It seems instructive to me that Jesus did little talking about His disciples’ pasts. You would think we’d have heard a lot about Matthew’s way of life as a tax collector, about Simon the Zealot’s association with a political movement known for violence. But we don’t. Their “testimonies” are never exploited. If there were dark moments in the backgrounds of the twelve (and there had to be), they were downplayed, buried in redemption. The Lord simply didn’t deal with the pasts of people in public. And, thankfully, the gospel writers chose the same policy.

This has got to encourage those of us with spiritual and moral resumes that are regrettable. We’re tempted to believe that there is no future for us in the apostolic venture. Not so on the Galilean beach; not so now. Lest we forget, Jesus took that first group and turned them into kingdom champions. No one was beyond redemption, beyond the possibility of life change.

Now baggage (as we are calling it) does have to be dealt with; a call to discipleship involves renunciation. Baggage must be resolved—not instantly, but in time through repentance and grace. There must be an openness to new disciplines, new thinking, new ways of relationship.

But the Lord always began right where people were. Shallow character, questionable reputation, and pessimistic perspectives were no deterrence to getting under way. All that was necessary was the willingness to lay that baggage at His feet. Without that willingness, a disciple is not a complete disciple.

WHAT MADE YOU INVITE ME?

In virtually every personal encounter with people, Jesus appears to have started with the bias of the heart rather than with an evaluation of outward performance. No small matter here. Jesus was not a talent scout; He was a student of the inner person. Moderns do their “head-hunting” on the basis of achievement, social skills, education, and perceived potential. They give tests, compare vitae, conduct interviews. Thankfully, not the Lord. He looked inward and assessed spiritual authenticity.

One can assume that each of the twelve began association with Christ as part of crowds who came to hear Him teach. They began as spectators. Perhaps each time they joined a crowd they moved a bit closer to the front and stuck around to ask questions—as seekers.

But there must have come a day when they engaged Him privately, their hearts mysteriously warmed by His words and demeanor. The Lord read their hearts like a book, and it eventuated in His invitation on the beach: “Why don’t you follow Me, share My mission?” And when they left the beach with Him, they completed the move from spectators to seekers to followers. Hearts had been aroused. Jesus had read them correctly. They’d begun the process of loving Him.

What would such an awakening look like today? It might begin with an awareness of our own spiritual darkness and a corresponding desire for life change. It might continue as a magnetic attraction to Jesus as Lord, to His ways and words as the only sane way to believe and live.

Additionally, spiritual curiosity might be evidenced by the way we begin to look at our world and its people, seeing the brokenness of life and sensing a growing desire to do something that calls people to God. Without such a heart, a disciple is not a complete disciple.

WHAT’S THE MOST IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTE OF A DISCIPLE?

“I will make you . . .” was probably a common theme when teachers invited students into a follow-me relationship. It was the commitment of a master to a follower. But the commitment anticipated a disciple who thirsted for learning, for a reshaping of life. This assumes submission. Obedience would not be too strong a word. The issue of trust comes into play, too: a disciple’s confidence that the discipler knows the way and is worthy to be followed. Boil it all down, and you get teachability.

I like that word. It suggests a follower passionate for growth and usefulness. When a person is teachable, energy is not wasted in useless debate and resistance. The discipler need not tiptoe through the truth. He or she can offer insight, correction, rebuke, and opportunity with the assumption that it will be joyfully received.

I suspect there may be a scarcity of teachable people today. A culture that encourages thoughtless defiance chokes out teachability. Wanna-be disciples who lack teachable spirits barely make it beyond the beach. Better that they would never say yes to the invitation until they have examined themselves on this one.

Incidentally, teachability does not imply a sort of despotic control by the discipler. The same Lord who asked for obedience washed His disciples’ feet as a servant. That provides the balance some are concerned about.

But the fact remains: Without the trait of teachability, a disciple is not a complete disciple.

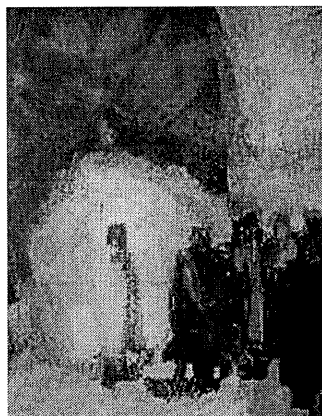


Illustration by Douglas Fryer

WHERE IS DISCIPLESHIP LIKELY TO TAKE ME?

While His disciples tended to be glued to the past and the present, Jesus focused on the future. He saw every incident, conversation, and learning experience in light of future maturity. His rebuke, for example, which might sting for a day or two, was not meant to humiliate. Rather it was designed to form character for harsh times ahead. His call to submission was directed at breeding leadership sensitivity. His two-by-two assignments to ministry were aimed at providing a clear picture of the kingdom mission.

If you're Jesus and your disciples shove the children away because they are not significant, you keep in mind the day when they will preach to the crowds in lands and cultures they've never heard of. If you're Jesus and your disciples tell a man who is doing good to stop ("because he's not one of us"), you remind yourself that there will come a time when they will learn to rejoice at any evidence that God's hand is at work.

If you're Jesus, you don't despair over today's incomplete picture; you concentrate on what's coming tomorrow. Always, on each occasion, the Lord was bringing the picture of their future into clearer focus.

We can't gloss over this if we desire discipleship. The picture Jesus has of us puts personality, character, habits, and ambitions on the line. It says that Christlikeness is the issue and the goal. Jesus will make every effort to reshape us into godly people. This is a lifelong process, sometimes painful, sometimes humbling, sometimes tiring . . . but rewarding for the one who stays the course. A would-be disciple might want to ask: Do I trust His picture more than I trust the one I have formed for myself? The question is not a shallow one.

Without a hunger for Christlikeness, a disciple is not a complete disciple.

WILL I BE ALONE IF I FOLLOW?

Absolutely not! Jesus was not in the business of developing solo performers. He was in the initial stages of building a church. And the church would provide an alternative to a dominant culture marked by cruelty and injustice, exploitation and greed, death and more death. There was a new community to be established; the original twelve were the prototype.

So we're not talking disciple (singular); we're talking disciples (plural).

A community has a way of life, ethics and morals, disciplines, and goals. And a community,

relationships and encourage the best from one another. Jesus began building this into His disciples from the get-go. Rugged individualism would not work here. These men were never sent to do anything alone. They learned to work in pairs, in teams, in groups. Interdependence was encouraged; mercy and grace in times of failure and conflict were the order of the day. By the time the Master was through with them, these 12 individuals were a community, ready to offer leadership in the shaping of a considerably larger community. Their performance in Acts proves it.

A modern disciple must ask: Am I prepared to get along with folks who are considerably different from me? Am I ready to master the graces of appreciation, encouragement, rebuke, correction? Will I be open to learning how to forgive, how to repent, how to submit? Am I willing to be second banana today and first banana tomorrow? It may be that we are not prepared for discipleship if we are not prepared to learn the lessons and disciplines of community.

There are no solo disciples in the life of the Lord. So why do we try to produce such today? It doesn't work. Genuine discipleship in part is certified by the way a man or woman knows how to connect with brothers and sisters. Only then does the world "know that you are [Christ's] disciples" (John 13:35).

Without such a community, a disciple just isn't a complete disciple.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I FALL FLAT ON MY FACE? WILL YOU REJECT ME?

An overview of how many times the original disciples fell short of reasonable expectations will quickly remind any would-be disciple that the process of apostolic development includes disappointment. Failure was all over the menu of the original twelve, but rejection was not.

If Jesus ever grew discouraged over the twelve, we don't hear about it. It sounds as if there was some occasional anger but not impatience; some stern warnings, but never threats. You soon realize that Jesus knew the hearts of these men better than they knew themselves. He recognized what we often do not: that the way to Christian maturity is paved with a thousand errors. We tend to write one another off and continue on our self-righteous way. Not our Lord. He never gave up.

It might be smart to take this self examination: Am I prepared to be stretched to the point of inadequacy? To play with pain? To seem the fool? To get in over my head? Because these are all likely, and they can mean defeat. But from such experiences come champions of the kingdom variety. Tough, conditioned, wise champions.

Without the humility learned through failure and errors, a disciple isn't really a complete disciple.

WHERE WILL I FIND THE POWER TO BE AND DO WHAT YOU ASK OF ME?

Of all the things Jesus did in the company of the twelve, this seems the most incredible: He took a ragtag group of men who showed relatively little promise and delegated to them the mission of world evangelization.

For the most part the disciples seem to have felt secure and empowered as long as Jesus was with them. One sees them scrambling to the back of the boat in the midst of a storm they were supposed to handle (at least some of them). "Do something!" is their cry to the Lord.

One sees them wringing their hands because they are unable to rebuke a demon in the life of a small boy. Again: "Do something!"

But at the other end of the discipleship journey, Jesus would say, “You do something!” (such as disciple the nations!).

With that challenge (and this is the answer to the question) comes the promise of the energy of His Spirit. Ancient men understood a promise like this while moderns struggle with this notion that one could entrust his spirit to another. In this case the spirit is the Holy Spirit, and if this Spirit were upon the disciples (a storm-stilling, demon-rebuking, life-changing Spirit), then preaching to crowds on Pentecost, healing the sick, bringing the church to the nations would not be an impossibility.

Would-be disciples of modern times need to be reminded that education, talent, and charisma have relatively little value in the kingdom. These qualities are indeed helpful to possess, but without the inner dynamic energy of the Spirit of Jesus, they are useless when it comes to doing work with an eternal purpose.

Without the inner work of the Holy Spirit, a disciple is not a complete disciple.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF FOLLOWING YOU?

Jesus didn't tell the twelve everything at once. The deeper teaching on Christlike growth, the implications of a worldwide mission, and ultimate martyrdom were unfolded in direct proportion to the maturity of the disciples. He put no greater burden on them than they were prepared to bear. If He'd told them everything right at the start, my sense is that most of them would have bailed out. So it took some time to go from “Follow me” to “When you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go” (John 21:18). Better that words like these wait until a person has done some growing up at the soul level.

But the answer to the question was always there for those who wanted to face it: How risky? You will die for Me.

It sounds like disciples are dying in Christ's name almost every day around the world. It just isn't happening that much in North America. But it could and just might one day. If “dying” is enlarged to include careers lost, high incomes forfeited, friends lost, and security seemingly uncertain, then maybe the dying has started here and there already.

Of this we can be sure, apart from the willingness to follow Him into death, a disciple isn't a complete disciple.

REALITY CHECK

It is too easy to glamorize discipleship—like I glamorized flying until someone challenged me to force my fantasy through the filter of reality. So also the follow-me invitation. Call what I've written the beach questions. The experiences I've had convince me that the answers to those questions are good ones. No regrets about not flying; and no regrets when Christ and those who disciplined me invited me to follow.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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On his days off, Gordon loves to climb up mountains or ski down them.