

Jesus' Definition of Discipleship

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Introduction.

- A. My father-in-law likes to tell me that preachers have the easiest job in the world. As he says, "You only have to work for two hours a week, and you have this whole big book to tell you what to say." He's joking, of course, but he's actually about half right. I'm on the clock for a whole lot more than two hours a week, but it is absolutely true that I let the Bible tell me what to say. That makes preaching a whole lot easier than it would be otherwise. I don't have to rack my brain every week, coming up with some new, wise, profound thought to amaze all of you with. Instead, I just open up the word of God, which is absolutely full of wise, profound thoughts, pick one, and explain it to all of you. As mental exercises go, that one's pretty simple.
- B. Of course, as the lives and the religious practices of the world around us show, listening to and obeying the word of God may be simple, but it's not easy. That's a danger we face too as Christians. We like to complicate our spiritual lives with all kinds of redefinitions and excuses. Just like the Pharisees did 2000 years ago, what we're trying to do is shy away from the frightening clarity of what God wants us to do with our lives. After we're done muddying the waters, what's left is much less simple, but it's also much easier.
- C. The problem with this obscuring process is that what it's really hiding is the path of Christ stretching out before us. Jesus Himself said that Christianity is both simple and hard. Consider His words in Matthew 16:24. There's not much mistaking our Lord's meaning in this verse, but most folks flat aren't willing to pick up the cross and follow. Let's explore what this means this evening by looking at Jesus' words in a similar text, Matthew 10:24-42. This one's going to come straight out of the Bible, folks. I'm not going to be doing anything but explaining the words of Jesus, but at the end of the day, it's those words that we need to be listening to. Let's consider them now. Let's learn how to follow by looking at Jesus' definition of discipleship.

I. Jesus and the Truth.

- A. According to our Lord, the first part of being a disciple is **IMITATING HIM**. This is clear from His words in Matthew 10:24-25. This is the sort of passage that we read right through without allowing it to confront us. "Of course I don't want to be more than Jesus," we say to ourselves. "All I want is to be like Him!" We say that in our hearts, but is that what our lives say? Consider, friends: Jesus lived the ultimate simple, stripped-down life. He had one mission, and literally everything that He did went toward that mission. Jesus didn't try to accumulate material possessions, He wasn't interested in 500 different activities, and He certainly didn't have time for any of the sin that easily ensnares us. He just did the will of God. Is that what our lives are about? Are we just doing the will of God, or are we trying to introduce our own ingredients to the Jesus recipe? If the latter's the case, if what we're shooting for is Jesus Plus, we need to recognize that we are trying to be what Jesus says we can't be. We're trying to be above our Master. Much of the time, friends, the reason why we don't do what we should is because we're spending our time and our energy trying to do things that don't matter. Let's defeat that complicating tendency by devoting ourselves simply to imitating Him.
- B. We need to recognize, though, that if we truly, truly devote ourselves to imitating Jesus, this is not going to be met with cuddles and hugs by everyone around us. People in the world don't like Christians with simple, uncompromising lives. They're different, they're challenging, and they're scary. As Jesus points out, they called Him Beelzebub even though He could work miracles that proved to anyone with half a brain that He was the Son of God. That was the effect that His godly life had on those around Him. Folks, we have the same mission in front of us, without even the affirmation that miracles bring. We need to expect what we will get.
- C. The next step in this process of discipleship is **PROCLAIMING THE TRUTH**. Jesus urges us to this in Matthew 10:26-27. Of course, we really can't imitate Jesus without telling others about His word, but let's pay attention to the emphasis that Jesus places on it here. He says repeatedly that His disciples are to take the things He taught them secretly and to teach them to others as publicly as they can. Sadly, today a lot of Christians do the opposite. They take the things they hear in the public assembly and hold them so closely that not a soul around them knows. Friends, that's not being a disciple of Jesus. We need to ask ourselves: Of the non-Christians in our lives, are they still sinners even though we've told them the truth, or are they still sinners because we haven't told them the truth? Brethren, Christianity's not for cowards. It's not for men and women who don't have the guts to do hard things for Jesus. Let's be bold, then, and proclaim the truth.
- D. Jesus next mentions one of the big obstacles in our way when He defines discipleship as **FEARING ONLY GOD**. Let's look at His words in Matthew 10:28-31. Notice, folks, that when Jesus tells His disciples not to fear those who can only kill the body, He is speaking literally. Jesus knows quite well that many, perhaps most, of the men to whom He was speaking will face the choice between standing for the truth and saving their own lives. In fact, Jesus knows that He Himself will die for the truth, and yet He says to them, "Don't be afraid of being killed by evil men. Be afraid of disappointing God."

- E. Thankfully, this is not a challenge that many of us have ever faced. In this country, God's command to serve Him and proclaim Him does not put our lives at risk. Even though this is so, much of the time, we are deterred from teaching the truth and living out the truth because of fear. We're afraid of inadequacy, social rejection, loss of earthly joys, and a hundred other things. We see the price that we might have to pay for doing what's right, and we consider the price too steep. Friends, we need to think about whose approval we're really after. Is it the approval of men that matters to us, or is it the approval of God? The Bible tells us that faith gains that approval. Cowardice doesn't. There's nothing on this earth that's worth being afraid of. Let's fear God.
- F. Jesus makes both the rewards and dangers explicit in urging us toward **CONFESSING HIM**. We see His description of both sides in Matthew 10:32-33. There's more than one way to confess Christ. Certainly, during our salvation process, we are required to confess Him, but that's not all the confession that is required of us. It's not merely saying, "Yes, I'm a disciple of Christ," to someone who asks. It's saying and doing the things that mark us as a disciple of Christ, even when those things are unpopular or unpleasant. It may be our unwillingness to go drinking with the guys after work because God doesn't approve of their conduct. It may be our persistence in ruffling everybody's feathers by pointing out what God expects of them. Just like everything else on this list, it is not geared to win popularity contests. Jesus was not a subtle, slink around in the shadows kind of guy. He was what He was, He made sure that everybody around Him knew it, and if they didn't like it, tough. If we want to genuinely confess Christ, we have to live the same way.

II. Jesus and Priorities.

- A. Because of this, Jesus tells us that part and parcel of discipleship is **ACCEPTING CONFLICT**. Look at His words in Matthew 10:34-36. Many of the things we've already said this evening have either pointed to conflict or assumed its existence, and the Christian life is inevitably a life of conflict. Because we have peace with God, we are automatically at war with the forces of evil. There is no way to be a conflict-free Christian. As Jesus makes clear here, this is not even conflict that stops under our own roofs. If we are dedicated to the service of God and our families aren't, that's going to strike some sparks. As many of us have, I have literally seen this verse play out before my eyes. My sister-in-law, Becky, is a wonderful woman in many ways, but she's not a Christian. Even so, she is confident in her own salvation and does not like to hear anyone question it. When my mother tells her that she hasn't been baptized for the forgiveness of sins, it makes her furious. "I was baptized when I was seven days old," she says, which, sadly, tells us all we need to know about her true spiritual state. As the Bible says, most people are not going to like the truth, and that doesn't change because we share DNA or a last name with them. We need to do what's right, and accept conflict when it comes.
- B. In this kind of conflict, though, or in any other kind, discipleship requires **PUTTING JESUS FIRST**. Jesus makes no bones about this in Matthew 10:37-39. This verse describes a huge, huge stumbling block for so many people. Their lives line up so that they think they have to choose between their families and Jesus, whether or not they actually do, and they make the wrong choice. There are countless examples of this, from the man who won't obey the gospel because his grandfather was part of some denomination, to the woman who won't hear the truth because her husband will quarrel with her if she does. All of these situations, as different as they are, have one thing in common. They're introducing family into a place where family doesn't belong. Our salvation isn't about Grandpa; it's about Jesus, and if we make it about Grandpa, it isn't about Jesus anymore. Jesus tells us plainly that if we love family more than Him, He's got no use for us.
- C. However, Jesus takes it a step further even than that in this passage. He tells us that we have to pick up our crosses and follow Him. Remember, folks, that Jesus is saying this before He's crucified. The cross hasn't become this exalted religious symbol yet. Instead, the cross is the symbol of the criminal's death. It's the destination of the lowest of the low. To put it in modern terms, Jesus is saying to us, "Walk down Death Row to the electric chair, and follow Me." Even if following Jesus were to lead us to a gruesome, agonizing death that would lead to the world's contempt, that's what we have to do to be His disciples. We have to do it because that's the only way we can tap into the great paradox of Christianity. If we want to gain eternal life, we have to give up our own lives, literally if need be. If we aren't willing to do that, we can't go to heaven.
- D. Finally, though, the last element of Jesus' definition of discipleship is **LOOKING TO THE REWARD**. This appears in the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:40-42. Interestingly Jesus seems to be changing His audience here a little bit. He's speaking not just to the seventy disciples, but to those who will receive them as they preach. In Jesus' words, there is both a specific lesson about generosity and a general lesson about attitude. Specifically, we need to be generous with other Christians, especially when they are engaged in doing the Lord's work. This could be generosity with our money, with our talents, with our time, or with any number of things. Whatever kind of generosity it is, though, Jesus tells us what the result will be. When we are generous to other Christians, it's the same thing in Jesus' eyes as though we were being generous to Him Himself, and when we are generous to Jesus, we're being generous to God. God won't forget.
- E. That leads us to the general lesson: that we need to always be considering our actions in light of the reward we will receive. What matters is not how others will see our actions here, but how God will see them there.

Conclusion. If you want to start living for the reward this evening, God will receive you. Come to Him now.