

Do You Really Want to be a Disciple?

Jesus was wandering along the shoreline where men were at work. Making a living from the water takes two tasks—making the gear work and using it. For fishermen in those days, this meant making nets and fishing. Both are smelly, strenuous, and involve being out in all kinds of weather. Jesus, usually busy at his own trade, was walking along and watching the work. Those he walked by might wonder why he isn't working at bringing home dinner for his family.

Fishing, like carpentry, was a family business. Fathers taught their sons at an early age, and sons helped their fathers when fathers got older. Fishing has its good days and bad days. On a good day, men bring home enough for the family and a little left over to sell at market. On a bad day, or after a few bad days in a row, the children might go to bed hungry. The need for a good catch brings the men to the water every day, except for the Sabbath rest.

How did Jesus find his first recruits?

What the busy fishermen didn't realize is that Jesus had come to a sudden change of direction. He'd just been baptized, challenged by temptations, and was determined to begin his ministry. Matthew says,

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.' (Matthew 4:17)

Now that he's begun his new work, he's looking for his team to help with it. How do you think his recruiting went?

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him.

Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. (Matthew 4:18-22)

Do you think that these four were the only folks Jesus found by the water that day? Do you think that he considered each of those he passed and only asked these four? Do you think that he might have asked others, others who looked at him as if he were crazy and then went back to their work? These four stepped away from their work and into history, while others were left behind.

There was no question, no hesitation in their responses. They left what they were doing immediately, without asking permission, considering the consequences, or apologizing to the co-workers and family who were left behind.

We give them a lot of credit for making this choice, for accepting a commitment to Jesus with no idea of where it was going to lead them. It's interesting that this response seems to be almost exactly the opposite of one of Jesus' parables. Later on Jesus said,

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is

not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'

Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. (Luke 14:28-32)

Peter and Andrew and James and John didn't stop to count the cost. They didn't stop to consider the implications of what they were doing. They simply stepped off the cliff into thin air. And their faith was reckoned to them as righteousness.

How did it turn out?

In fact, they had a front row seat for some of the most momentous events of all time:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

They were there when it all happened. They listened to the wisdom of their teacher. They tried to help him even when they didn't understand what he was doing. They were challenged beyond their strength and abandoned him, but they came back and continued his work. Their strengths and their weaknesses were laid bare for all to see, generation after generation.

Each of the first disciples showed their love and commitment to Jesus, no matter what the cost. I think it was Charles Colson who said that Jesus must have been the real thing, because of what his followers were willing to go through for him. The Watergate conspirators couldn't even hold their stories together to save their own jobs, and it takes much more conviction to make the sacrifices the disciples made.

Of these four we heard about in today's passage, we know of the persecution of two in Acts:

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. (Acts 12:1-4)

In spite of everything, Peter continued live and teach as a disciple to the very end: He said,

I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things. (2 Peter 1:13-15)

Becoming a disciple was a lifelong commitment, whether that life was destined to be short or long.

Was Mary a disciple too?

I sometimes wonder who the very first disciple really was. Was it one of these fishermen, or was it really Mary, his mother, who was there at the beginning. She heard from the angel that

her son would be the savior of her people. Did she believe that all along while she was changing his diapers and looking for him when he wandered off in Jerusalem?

When do you suppose she made the commitment to believing in him as well as loving him? She knew something was coming when she nudged him to help out with the wine at the wedding. She saw the crowds, and she even had to get in line to talk to him while he was working. She was there when he died, and she was there to hear the news of his return.

Some folks believe that he must have appeared to her too, when he came back, but that their meeting was never recorded. How could he not have visited the one who cared for him his whole life? She knew him, and she was loyal to him, from the very beginning. She built her life around him.

What did Jesus expect of a disciple?

The rest of what Jesus said when he was talking about planning ahead was this:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26-27)

Jesus is very clear. Being a disciple is a lifetime commitment 24/7. Nothing can come first, although many other experiences and relationships may grow out of that one commitment.

For a disciple, there's no authority that takes precedence over the Word of God. There's no area of life where disciples don't belong to Jesus. The work disciples are called to do is at his direction and nobody else's. Jesus is in charge of the lives and the work of his disciples, period.

Do you want to be a disciple? Do you really? There's only one choice that's not an option. You can't say, "sometimes." Being a disciple is something you either are or you aren't. There's no option that says you can be a disciple on Sunday mornings, and when you're in the hospital, and at Christmas, and when you're having a crisis and need some help. Discipleship is not just what you're doing at the moment, but who you are. You're either a disciple for life, or not.

Are you willing to let Jesus be in charge?

The gospel is about Jesus—about who he was, what he said, what he did, and how the rest of us relate to him with our lives. The power and the glory are his and don't belong to those of us who follow him. Paul says,

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:17-18)

Jesus is the center, the essence of the gospel. Jesus is the center of the life of every disciple, as all disciples strive to grow more like him.

Everything that followers of Jesus do, in church and outside of church, as his people in the world, is under his leadership. We need to act like disciples, talk like disciples, and treat each other like disciples. Jesus said,

By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:35)

Disciples are known by their behavior. Clearly the people of Corinth that Paul was writing to were having a little trouble in this area. Paul says,

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. (1 Corinthians 1:10)

It's critically important that, even in times of uncertainty, disciples still act like disciples and show who they belong to by the way they treat each other.

The ministry of every church is the work of its people. Demonstrating the gospel, each in his or her own way, is what a disciple does and is called to do. The reality is that all people who belong to Jesus are charged to do ministry, in every aspect of their lives—at home in their families, at work or school, with strangers at the mall, while driving in rush hour traffic, wherever they are and whatever they're doing.

If you choose to be a disciple of Jesus, the relationship you have with him and the way you live out your commitment to him belong only to you and to him.