

JESUS THE DISCIPLER

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Discipleship, or as it is often referred to today, mentoring, is trendy and popular. It often is seen as a replacement for confrontational preaching and doctrinal instruction. Mentoring is a good thing, but it must be more than merely praying with someone, patting him on the back, or giving him tips for success in the Christian life. Jesus gave the perfect example of what discipleship should be. His discipling activity was not aimed at being popular or sugarcoated (John 6:60). It was aimed at changing hearts for eternity.

Three related terms need to be defined before proceeding further. The first is the term “disciple,” a person who makes another’s teachings a way of life. When discipleship is mentioned, it is commonly understood to refer to being and growing as a disciple. Discipleship, however, also means making and encouraging disciples. I will focus upon this second meaning here.

The second term is “discipline.” Sharing the same root with disciple, discipline refers to any reactive activity on the part of authority to prevent or correct deviant behavior or thinking on the part of a disciple. This type of activity is not wrong and often necessary. It is commanded many times in Scripture. Full-orbed discipleship must include discipline to produce disciples that please the Lord.

The third aspect of discipleship is what I call “discipling.” Discipling rounds out the biblical concept of discipleship. Discipling is proactive, constructive behavior on the part of authority to ensure adherence to the teachings of that authority. This is the aspect of discipleship primarily in view in Matthew 28:19 and John 21:15-19. As just mentioned, Jesus demonstrated perfectly how to be an effective discipler. Nowhere is his discipling more apparent than in John 17. Jesus describes there his own activities among the disciples as he prays to the Father.

A Revealer of God's character and glory

Jesus’ words in verse four set the standard for all discipleship. “I have glorified you on the earth. I have finished the work which you have given me to do.” What kind of disciples do you think Jesus would have turned out had he not been able to say this? The answer is obvious—the kind of disciples we all too often turn out! A discipler manifests the character of God to his disciples to one degree or another. If by God’s grace we display God’s glories (perfections) in our conduct, speech, attitudes, and wisdom, then those whom we teach and guide will have a righteous guide. Paul was able to say, “The things you have seen in me, do!” Can you say this to your pupils, your children, your wife, your neighbor?

In verse six, Jesus declares to the Father that he “manifested your name to the men whom you have given me out of the world.” This means far more than simply telling the disciples what

is God's name. Jesus showed in his life (and especially in his death) that the Father's name was to be trusted, since that wonderful name reveals a God who is able to keep his own (11), who unites his own (22), and who loves his own (26).

Furthermore, it's not enough simply to pray that God's children will be set apart unto God: disciples must show the way (18-19) just as Jesus did! Jesus "sanctified" himself to complete his task before the Father. How focused are you upon the discipling duties to which God has called you? Or are those duties just one of any number of other things that you may or may not get to?

A faithful Steward of God's Word

Jesus was also the perfect discipler in the way he handled the heavenly message entrusted to him. He declares in verse eight, "For I have given to them the words which You have given Me." The same thought is found in verse fourteen. He also links the declaration of God's Word with the declaration of God's name. Verse twenty-six reads, "I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them." Notice that the key to unity and mutual love is the presence of God's self-revelation. Those that would try to hold that doctrine is divisive have to argue with Jesus on that score!

Our Lord states here that he has not been an innovator. He has not taught anything that has not already been revealed by God. He has said only what God has given him to say, nothing more, and nothing less. If you are to be an effective discipler, you must resist the temptation to preach your illustrations, your experiences, your analysis, your opinions. You must preach God's Word. Period. Man's "wisdom" has nothing to offer the soul, so avoid pop psychology and cleverness like the plague. By all means, use illustrations to help your listener understand. But the tail must not wag the dog. Teach your disciples the whole counsel of God, nothing more and nothing less.

As you read the gospels, you will notice that Jesus did not content himself with speaking in generalities, either. He made specific applications and specific directions to his disciples. Take just a few examples from the gospels. In Matthew 10:5-42, as he sent his disciples out to preach, he told them what to do, where to go, what to say, how to act, what to watch out for, what to expect, why to have hope, and why to carry on (see also Matthew 19:27-30). Jesus spoke with openness and honesty (Matthew 17:22-23), even though the message was hard to take. He spoke with authority (Matthew 7:28, 29 cf. 21:23-46), while at the same time exhibiting patience, compassion, and persistence (John 21:15-17). He denounced false religion with vigor (Matthew 23), and offered comfort to his followers (John 14:16, cf. Luke 24:36ff.).

In other words, Jesus was not content with clever formulas or platitudes. As a faithful steward of the Word, he distributed it and applied it wherever and whenever necessary.

A loving Mediator on behalf of the disciples

I have long thought that what a person prays for reveals the true nature of his walk with God, following the biblical principle that “out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). That a person prays at all says something as well, particularly when those prayers are principally occupied with praying for others. Such is the case with Jesus’ prayer in John 17. His mediatorial work is already begun as he lovingly intercedes for his own before the Father. His own hold a special place in his heart (9). Notice the matters for which Jesus prays.

First of all, he prays for his disciples’ righteous unity in himself. (Remember that this unity comes in context of doctrinal instruction.) This unity is to follow the heavenly pattern: “Holy Father, keep through your name those whom you have given me, that they may be one as we are” (11). Jesus develops the basis of heavenly unity in verses twenty through twenty-three. The preaching of the Word is foremost in putting feet to this aspect of Jesus’ mediation (20, 21). Then comes the imparting of God’s glory (22-24), especially the perfection of mutual love in divine purity, displaying the nature of the unity within the Godhead. There can be no true, godly unity with false teaching or sinful acts in the mix. Remember that principle when you pray for your disciples.

Next, Jesus prays for his disciples’ protection from evil (14-16). Persecution is a natural result of receiving the Word and living by it. So disciples may expect to be marked for harassment by the world. Jesus prays fervently that his disciples will be guarded. They had not yet suffered unto death, but most of them will learn what it means to give up their lives for the cause of Christ. Until the Lord takes his disciples home, they need to be prayed for! You should be praying that the Lord will guard the souls of those whom he has entrusted to your oversight.

Third, Jesus prays for his disciples’ ministries (17-20). Not only does Jesus pray for the Twelve he has commissioned, he prays for you and me, and all those who would come to Christ as a result of the Twelve’s ministering in Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost part of the earth! You should follow Jesus’ example and pray for the labors of the disciples in your care. Pray specifically that those ministries would reap many souls, and that they would be kept safe in the hands of God.

Lastly, Jesus prays for his disciples’ perseverance (24). Thankfully, Jesus did not think it enough to pray only for our physical safeguarding. He is interested in our eternal safety! Notice how he prays for our ultimate glorification: “Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.” When my children do a special project in school, they are eager to show it to me when they get home. I think it’s more than merely a matter of looking for Daddy’s approval; they want me to rejoice with them in the glory of their handiwork. This is similar to the thought Jesus expresses. It is as if Jesus was saying, “My disciples haven’t seen anything yet! I long for them to see me as I really am, in all my glory. We will rejoice together at the perfect salvation which I have accomplished for their sakes.” Pray that the disciples under your guidance will come to see Jesus in all his glory!

In his earthly ministry, Jesus set the perfect example for us to follow if we would be disciplers that please God and benefit the kingdom. He displayed God's glory and character in life and word, faithfully administered the gospel of the kingdom to his flock, and besought the Father earnestly on their behalf. Pray for God's grace as you seek to disciple others. Take to yourself as God's promise to you in this regard Isaiah 40:11, "He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, **and gently lead those who are with young.**"