

Why Bother with Discipleship

by

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If we are Christians simply by believing that Jesus died for our sins, then that is all it takes to have sins forgiven and go to heaven when we die. Why, then, do some people keep insisting that something more than this is desirable? Lordship, discipleship, spiritual formation, and the like?

What more could one want than to be sure of their eternal destiny and enjoy life among others who profess the same faith as they do. Of course everyone wants to be a good person. But that does not require that you actually do what Jesus himself said and did. Haven't you heard? "Christians aren't perfect. Just forgiven."

Now those who honestly find themselves concerned about such matters might find it helpful to consider four simple points:

First, there is absolutely nothing in what Jesus himself or his early followers taught that suggests you can decide just to enjoy forgiveness at Jesus' expense and have nothing more to do with him.

Some years ago A. W. Tozer expressed his "feeling that a notable heresy has come into being throughout evangelical Christian circles — the widely-accepted concept that we humans can choose to accept Christ only because we need him as Savior and that we have the right to postpone our obedience to him as Lord as long as we want to!"¹ He then goes on to state "that salvation apart from obedience is unknown in the sacred scriptures."

This 'heresy' has created the impression that it is quite reasonable to be a "vampire Christian." One in effect says to Jesus: "I'd like a little of your blood, please. But I don't care to be your student or have your character. In fact, won't you just excuse me while I get on with my life, and I'll see you in heaven." But can we really imagine that this is an approach that Jesus finds acceptable?

And when you stop to think of it, how could one actually trust him for forgiveness of sins while not trusting him for much more than that. You can't trust him without believing that he was right about everything, and that he alone has the key to every aspect of our lives here on earth. But if you believe that, you will naturally want to stay just as close to him as you can, in every aspect of your life.

Secondly, if we do not become his apprentices in kingdom living we remain locked in defeat so far as our moral intentions are concerned. This is where most professing Christians find themselves today. Statistical studies prove it. People, generally, choose to sin. And they are filled with explanations as to why, everything considered, it understandable to do so. But, even so, no one chooses to be a sinner. It is amusing that people will admit to lying, for example, but stoutly deny that they are liars.

We want to be good, but we are prepared, ready, to do evil — should circumstances require it. And of course they do 'require' it, with deadening regularity. As Jesus himself indicated, those who practice sin actually are slaves of it. (John 8:34) Ordinary life confirms it. How consistently do you find people able to do good and avoid evil as they intend?

By contrast, practicing Jesus' word as his apprentices enables us to understand our lives and to see how we can interact with God's redemptive resources, ever at hand. This in turn gives us an increasing freedom from failed intentions, as we learn from him how, simply, do what we know to be right. By a practiced abiding in his words we come to know the truth and the truth does, sure enough, make us free. (John 8:36)

Thirdly, only avid discipleship to Christ through the spirit brings the inward transformation of thought, feeling and character that "cleans the inside of the cup" (Matt. 23:25) and "makes the tree good" (Matt. 12:33). As we study with Jesus we increasingly become on the inside — with "the Father who is in secret" (Matt 6:6) — exactly what we are on the outside, where actions and moods and attitudes visibly play over our body alive in its social context. An amazing simplicity will take over our lives — a simplicity that is really just transparency.

This requires a long and careful learning from Jesus to remove the duplicity that has become second nature to us — as is perhaps inevitable in a world where, to ‘manage’ our relations to those about us, we must hide what we really think, feel and would like to do if only we could avoid observation. Thus, a part of Jesus’ teaching was to “avoid the leaven, or permeating spirit, of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” (Luke 12:1)

The Pharisees were in many respects the very best people of Jesus’ day. But they located goodness in behavior and tried to secure themselves by careful management at the behavioral level. However, that simply cannot be done. Behavior is driven by the hidden or secret dimension of human personality, from the depths of the soul and body, and what is present there will escape. Hence they always failed at some point to do what is right, and had to redefine, redescribe or explain it away — or simply hide it.

By contrast the fruit of the spirit, as described by Jesus and Paul, does not consist in actions, but in attitudes or settled personality traits that make up the substance of the “hidden” self, the “inner man.” “Love” captures this fruit in one word, but in such a concentrated form that it needs to be spelled out. Thus, “the fruit (singular) of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” (Gal 5:22) Other such passages easily come to mind, such as 2 Peter 1:4 – 11, 1 Cor. 13, and Romans 5:1 – 5.

“Spiritual formation” in the Christian tradition is a process of increasingly being possessed and permeated by such character traits as we walk in the easy yoke of discipleship with Jesus our teacher. From the inward character the deeds of love then naturally — but supernaturally — and transparently flow. Of course there will always be room for improvement, so we need not worry that we will become perfect — at least for a few weeks or months. Our aim is to be pervasively possessed by Jesus through constant companionship with him. Like our brother Paul: “This one thing I do!... I press toward the mark!... That I may know him!” (Phil. 3)

Finally, for the one who makes sure to walk as close to Jesus as possible there comes the reliable exercise of a power that is beyond

them in dealing with the problems and evils that afflict earthly existence. Jesus is actually looking for people he can trust with his power. He knows that otherwise we remain largely helpless in the face of the organized and disorganized evils around us and unable to promote his will for good in this world with adequate power.

He is the one who said, “I have been given say over all things in heaven and earth. So you go....” (Matt. 28:18) Of him it was said that “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him.” (Acts 10:38) We are called to do his work by his power.

However we may understand the details there can be no doubt, on the biblical picture of human life, that we were meant to be inhabited by God and live by a power beyond ourselves. Human problems cannot be solved by human means. Human life can never flourish unless it pulses with “the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe.” (Eph. 1:19) But only constant students of Jesus will be given adequate power to fulfill their calling to be God’s person for their time and their place in this world.

But, someone will say, can I not be saved — get into heaven when I die — without any of this? Perhaps you can. God’s goodness is so great, I am sure, that He will let you in if He can find any basis at all to do so. But you might wish to think about what your life amounts to before you die, about what kind of person you are becoming, and whether you really would be comfortable for eternity in the presence of one whose company you have not found especially desirable for the few hours and days of earthly existence. And he is, after all, One who says to you now, “Follow me!”

[1] Tozer, A.W. *I Call It Heresy*. Harrisburg, PA.: Christian Publications, 1974, p. 5f

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