

ARE YOU WILLING TO BECOME A DISCIPLE OF JESUS CHRIST?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

In the beginning of our Lord's ministry, he said to a few fishermen sitting on their boats and fixing their nets by the shore of Lake Galilee, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." (Mark 1:17.) Immediately Peter and Andrew, followed by James and John, left their nets and followed him. They were later joined by eight other men, and together over the next three years they did become fishers of men. They went through a process of being discipled by the Lord, learning to live for him and with him, in order to take the good news of salvation into their generation and the ones to follow. Jesus then went to the cross and took upon himself the sins of mankind, died and was buried. Then God the Father raised him from the grave. He appeared to his disciples over the next forty days, and then just before he was to ascend back to the presence of his Father he gathered his eleven disciples and said, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20.)

Some 20 years later a second-generation Christian and disciple named Paul would share the goal of all discipling with the Colossians when he wrote that he was delighted to reveal the mystery of God to the Gentiles, which was "...Christ in you, the hope of glory. And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ." (Colossians 1:27-28.) In other words, maturity is the goal-being totally set free from dependence on man and becoming totally dependent on God; being ruled not by circumstances but by the sovereign God, Jesus. In the summer of AD 67 the apostle Paul, having served the Lord Jesus faithfully for some 30 years, was spending his last days on earth in a Roman prison provided by Nero, awaiting his death by beheading. Never being one to bemoan his circumstances, he wrote the following words of encouragement to his spiritual son and faithful disciple Timothy (the next generation): "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. Suffer hardship with me as, a good soldier of Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 2:1-3.) The apostle was living out his life in obedience to the command of his risen Lord spoken some 35 years earlier.

The apostles as well as Paul's disciples were faithful in their generation to their calling, and all the generations to follow have been faithful to their calling to one degree or another. The fruit is seen in the lives of the maturing Christians we are surrounded and encouraged by. However, in this modern era in our western society, the church of Jesus Christ is struggling with the whole concept of discipleship. There are so many voices calling out for our time and energy, and many of us find ourselves losing the spiritual wisdom to come before the Lord for our focus. Our Lord has called us to put time aside to have a relationship with him and to invest in the spiritual maturity of younger believers. The temptation for the church, because of the lack of time and energy, is to invest money in some packaged self-improvement programs designed to produce mature men and women for Christ in the privacy of their own homes in just 12 weeks. The fruit of such programs is contained in a three-ring binder that goes on the shelf. But we need to understand that our Lord's command still stands for each generation until he comes again: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations." And when he comes again he should be able to find his faithful followers either discipling others in this generation or being discipled themselves by mature believers.

As we turn to Luke 9: 57-10:24, we need to realize that our risen Lord is still calling men and women: "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." For once Jesus becomes our Lord and Savior, he expects us to not only follow him but be available to be discipled by him, through his word and through relationships with mature believers, so that his heart of love and his message of salvation can be taken into the next generation by those we have in turn discipled. This is a process that takes a lifetime; we should never stop

being disciplined or discipling. So the question we want to ask ourselves today is, "Are you willing to become a disciple of Jesus Christ?" If so....

I. Allow Jesus to define the calling, Luke 9:57-62

Our Lord had been ministering in Northern Galilee, and then he had moved south to the city of Capernaum where he healed a demoniac boy. Then he determined to "set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). As he traveled south toward the holy city, the shadow of the cross fell heavily across his path, and his heart was burdened with the reality that "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11), as well as the reality that the sheep of Israel had no shepherds. During those last few months before the cross, our Lord spent more and more time with his disciples, whom he was training to bring his gospel of the kingdom into the age of the Spirit after his resurrection. But at that time the twelve disciples who had been with Jesus for the last two and one-half years were still struggling to understand all the spiritual principles of discipleship within the spiritual kingdom of God.

For example, in Luke 9:52-56 our Lord wanted his disciples to go ahead and set up some sleeping arrangements at a Samaritan village for the group. The Jews and the Samaritans (a mixed race of Jews and Gentiles) were not on the best of terms because of a rebuke by the prophet Ezra some 400 earlier about mixed marriages. So when a Samaritan innkeeper heard that Jesus and his men were heading south to worship in Jerusalem instead of on Mount Gerizim, he responded, as it were, "No way, Jose!" and refused to receive them. As a result, the brothers James and John, whom Jesus called the "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17), asked the Lord if they could "nuke" the village with fire as Elijah (whom they had just seen during the Lord's transfiguration) had done 850 earlier to the Baal priest on Mount Carmel. They lost track of the whole point of his ministry, and Jesus had to remind them: "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." (Luke 9:55.) "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16.)

At the same time, our Lord was aware of the need to train more men and women from among the local crowds who sincerely wanted to follow him and proclaim his message of salvation while he was still alive on earth and then after his death, resurrection and ascension. They would have to be trained in such a way that they would be able to not only proclaim the gospel in their own generation, but disciple others in future generations until he returned to this earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Let's look at Luke 9:57-62:

And as they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Permit me first to go and bury my father." But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God." And another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

We are called to lose our lives. In Luke 9:18-27, we found our Lord teaching his twelve men what he considered the true marks of a genuine disciple. The men and women who desire to follow him must (1) believe that he is "the Christ of God" (9:18-20); (2) be willing to take up their cross and die daily (9:21-23) to their hopes, dreams, and ambitions; and eventually, should the situation call for it, (3) be willing to lose their life as Jesus' cousin and their friend John the Baptist had under the wicked hand of Herod Antipas (9:24-27). For when God calls a man or woman to follow him he calls them to die so that he can live his life in and through them.

We are called to leave our "comfort zone." As our Lord was traveling with his twelve men in Galilee, three men who apparently were part of an amazed and admiring crowd each in turn approached him hoping to become one of his disciples.

The first man said, "I will follow you anywhere!"

Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." In other words, did this man really understand that if he was willing to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, he would be called to live like our Lord-moving from village to village, house to house, cave to cave, etc., without any hope of eventually having a place he could call home? For since the beginning our Lord's life in Bethlehem, "there was no room...in the inn." (Luke 2:7.) As an adult he had been forced out of his home town of Nazareth. Later the leaders of Jerusalem and the people of Judea and Galilee had rejected him, and most recently the Samaritan innkeeper had refused to give him lodging. So would this potential disciple be truly willing to follow Jesus anywhere and give up all the comfort and security of home and family? Apparently not, for we don't ever hear of him again.

Jesus said to the second man, "Follow me."

But this man answered, "Permit me first to go and bury my father." The son felt a deep obligation to not only bury his father but also to observe the 30-day mourning period, which was a duty and a sign of kindness. But the call to discipleship had to be accepted when issued, or it would be lost. As for his dead father, there were enough who were still spiritually dead to handle the burial. "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God." The problem with this man was that he was willing to follow the Lord, but he wanted to set the agenda or the terms of discipleship. And our Lord responded by challenging his loyalties and his deeper motives for wanting to be a disciple. If Jesus is sovereign Lord, then following him means obeying his commandments without conditions or reservation.

A third man said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home."

Jesus answered, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." Once again we see that our Lord was able to read the motives of this man's heart; he knew that if this man went back to his family, they might prevail on him in a variety of ways-the obligation to family business and other loyalties-so that even if he eventually did follow the Lord, in time he would drop out with a heart filled with guilt that he wasn't providing for his family. This man had a divided heart. I don't know how many people I've met whose families had talked them out of going into the ministry! It isn't as if God hasn't forgiven them, but they have missed a wonderful calling.

The Lord, knowing our hearts so well, would hear Peter say later, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You."

Jesus replied, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life."
(Mark 10:28-30.)

One of the most cherished privileges our people and staff have been given in this ministry is the encouragement by the elders to invest our lives in discipling men and women in this body. The spiritual principles we use are all the same, but the method of each one differs to fit the variety of personalities. And the spiritual fruit is all the same-a deep and abiding joy in our hearts as we watch our disciples grow into spiritual maturity and begin discipling others. Just last Wednesday, Steve Zeisler was telling us of the joy he had of taking some 15 of the men in his Thursday morning study to Mexico to help finish a church other teams had started. As he was sharing his experiences of living, eating, and working with those men, I didn't think I had seen that much joy in someone's eyes and spirit since Noah parked his ark on Mount Ararat! And a few months ago one of our

elders, Ed Woodhall, who had been discipling some young married couples, called me just to tell me the joy he was having investing his life, Biblical knowledge and spiritual experience with them, and that they had arrived at a point in their lives where they wanted to begin to disciple others, which they are doing right now. And on and on it goes, faithful men and women among us willing to be discipled and then to disciple others until the Lord returns.

Are you willing to become a disciple of Jesus Christ? Then allow him to define the calling, and...

II. Allow Jesus to define the goals, Luke 10:1-2

Now after this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them two and two ahead of Him to every city and place where He Himself was going to come. And He was saying to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest."

It is at this point in the harmony of the gospels that, according to John 7 and 8, our Lord arrived in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths), around October. He began to teach in the temple. In response to his teaching, some of the religious leaders said he had a demon and others rejected him as Messiah, but many of the multitude believed in him. Then the Pharisees sought to arrest him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple, returning to Galilee (John 8:59).

As you recall, our Lord had already sent out his twelve disciples as recorded in Luke 9:1-10 to minister in Galilee. Now, out of the many who were following our Lord on a daily basis, he chose some 70-72 new disciples. Their goal was to travel in pairs and minister in the cities and countryside of Jordan and Judea and prepare Israel for the official offer of her King in the triumphal entry that was only a few months away. Once they had opened the doors to those people he would follow them and minister.

"The harvest is plentiful..." The goal of our Lord's ministry was well-stated in Luke 19:10: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." The goal of our Lord's ministry must be the goal of our ministry: the salvation of the spiritually lost in every city, village, farm, home, and country in every generation until he comes again (Matthew 28:18-20). Our Lord encouraged these new disciples with words of great joy when he said that the harvest was plentiful. There were many men, women, and children who were ready to enter the kingdom of God because the salvation process had already been started by the Lord; he had cast the word of God on good soil, and that seed had grown to the point that all that was left to do was to go into the fields and harvest those willing hearts. Then the Lord showed them that they would be tempted to be overwhelmed by seeing the fields so full with grain ready for harvest and realizing that there were so few workers to harvest the grain. Our Lord's solution was to beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. In other words, don't panic-spend time praying. You can really sense this pressure today in Eastern Europe as well as the Soviet Union: so many open doors, and so few men and women prepared to follow the Lord into the season of harvest.

In the first week of October Anne Marie and I visited Dudley and Janet Wiener, who are living and ministering as missionaries from this body in the city of Paris. Dudley was first discipled by Jeff Farrar, who is now a pastor at Central Peninsula Church. Then he was invited to be discipled in our intern program as well as by the pastors involved with Careers Alive and our Sunday evening Body Life services. He then felt called by God to Paris, and over the next few years was able to finally see God open those doors where he and his family have been faithfully ministering under an evangelical mission board. As I walked through the streets of Paris with Dudley one day, I felt the spiritual pressure of living in a city of 12 million people of many different races, philosophies, and religions. It gives you a feeling of helplessness. How in the world do you penetrate such spiritual darkness with the gospel of Jesus Christ? But when I shared this feeling with Dudley, what he said was, "Why don't we pray?" We are forced to fall back on the encouraging words of our Lord: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Are you willing to become a disciple of Jesus Christ? Then allow Jesus to define the calling, allow Jesus to

define the goal, and,

III. Allow Jesus to define the ministry and the message

Luke 10:3-16

"Go your ways; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no shoes; and greet no one on the way. And whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house.' And if a man of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him; but if not, it will return to you. And stay in that house, eating and drinking what they give you; for the laborer is worthy of his wages. Do not keep moving from house to house. And whatever city you enter, and they receive you, eat what is set before you; and heal those in it who are sick, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whatever city you enter and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your city which clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you; yet be sure of this, that the kingdom of God has come near.' I say to you, it will be more tolerable in that day for Sodom, than for that city. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had been performed in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the judgment, than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will be brought down to Hades! The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me."

Here we see our Lord giving his new disciples the same kind of instructions he gave the twelve earlier. (1) They needed to know that they were going into enemy territory as lambs among hungry wolves. (2) They were to make no provision for the next day, but trust God for each day of ministry. (3) They were not to allow themselves to become sidetracked, but they were to pick a city and focus on it. (4) Once they arrived at a city, they were to find a home that would respond to their peaceful greeting, and if invited to come in, they were to stay the whole time eating and drinking without complaint whatever was put before them.

They were to prepare the people for the gospel message by healing those who were sick and preaching, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." That is, God's sovereign rule was about to enter their hearts when the Lord Jesus came, and they would experience their complete salvation.

Jesus instructed these disciples to give a word of judgment to the cities that would not receive them: They were to go out into the street, take off their sandals, and shake off the dust in protest. Then they were to give them the warning: "The kingdom of God has come near [as close as you are to us, you could have been to your Messiah]." In rejecting the disciples, they would in truth have rejected their Messiah. The kingdom could not be stopped even if they tried to ignore it.

Then Christ gave his personal word of judgment. As there are different degrees of glory for the saints, so we can see there are different degrees of judgment our Lord will pass out on the day of final judgment to those who have rejected him, his message, and his messengers. The judgment will be based on the amount of spiritual light they received and then rejected while living on earth. As these cities were given more truth, along with it they were given more responsibility to receive it. The message these cities were given was so great that if they turned it down, woe to them! Sodom, the city of Abraham's and Lot's day, was physically judged by fire because of its wickedness against the Lord. "Sodom and Gomorrah...indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh..." (Jude 7.) But any city that was given the offer of salvation by the Messiah's disciples and rejected it would be judged more severely than Sodom of old. Chorazin and Bethsaida were located close to Capernaum, so Jesus must have visited them many times, preaching the kingdom of God and doing signs and wonders. Then the Lord told his disciples to tell the cities that rejected him, "For if the miracles had been performed in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the judgment, than for you."

The prophet Amos denounced these Phoenician cities around 780 BC for selling the Jews as slaves to the

Edomites, and the prophet Joel in the same century denounced them for selling the Jewish children to the Greeks. Capernaum was the port city our Lord called home, where he worshipped, chose some of his early disciples, performed many miracles and wonders, and spoke many times to the crowd about his Person and purpose. But after all was said and done, except for a few disciples, the crowd dropped off and rejected his messiahship. "And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will be brought down to Hades [the place of torment and flame]!" (See also Luke 16:23-24.) The city is now laid in ruins.

The disciples were sent out to a variety of cities and villages to announce the good news of salvation which could be found in him and him alone. Most of us are not called to preach to a whole city or village, but to individuals, but the spiritual principle remains the same: "The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me." (Luke 10:16.) Woe to those who reject the Lord Jesus and his offer of salvation, for the day of judgment is coming.

I thought of this verse recently when I officiated at a wedding of a Christian couple. One set of parents were not Christians, and our Christian wedding ceremony was offensive to their secular beliefs. After the church ceremony, the wedding party and guests were invited to their home for a reception. When I arrived, a few minutes later than most of the guests, I saw the parents standing at the front door welcoming someone just ahead of me. I walked up with a joyful heart hoping to greet them. But as I approached the woman saw me and said, "Excuse me, we are very busy!" and slammed the door in my face. This verse flashed across my mind as my heart wept, for they are still living in their sin and darkness. "The one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me."

Are you willing to become a disciple of Jesus Christ? Then allow Jesus to define the calling, the goals, and the ministry and message, and...

IV. Allow Jesus to evaluate your ministry, Luke 10:17-24

And the seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." And He said to them, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall injure you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven." At that very time He rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit, and said, "I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes. Yes, Father, for thus it was well-pleasing in Thy sight. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. And turning to the disciples, He said privately, "Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see, for I say to you, that many prophets and kings wished to see the things which you see, and did not see them, and to hear the things which you hear, and did not hear them."

The 70 or 72 men returned to the Lord, and it soon became obvious that they had walked in obedience to his instructions. As a result they returned to be evaluated just as the twelve disciples before them had (Luke 9:10). They were very much like many of us who are given ministries by the Lord when we return from Columbia, Mexico, Romania, France, Java, Timor or wherever the Lord has sent us. We usually are excited about what the Lord did in and through us. So were the disciples: "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." Jesus responded, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning." In the immediate context it seems that what Jesus was saying was, "You were experiencing my power at work in and through you so you could cast out demons while on earth, but I want you to know that I was present when Satan was cast out of heaven. His power was broken then, it was broken at my temptation in the wilderness, it is broken now by my power through you, and as I look into eternity, his power will be broken in the future by all who deal with him and his demons in my name."

He continued, "I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall injure you [I will protect you from any attack from Satan in which as a murderer he

tries to kill you]. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven." What Jesus meant was, don't rejoice in the activities of a ministry, for as Ephesians 2:10 says, these works were set out beforehand for us, and all we have to do is walk in them. But we are to rejoice in the fact we have an eternal relationship with the living God.

As our Lord listened to the many wonderful reports of his disciples, he rushed into the presence of his Father rejoicing greatly. "Father, you are awesome!" For the Holy Spirit had provided the power and protection for his men. He praised his Father, Lord of heaven and earth (and Lord over Satan), because he had worked these mighty works through his spiritual babes rather than the wise and intelligent (or the priestly class in Jerusalem), and this was all pleasing in his Father's sight. Did you ever think Jesus is rejoicing like that over your life as you seek to walk in obedience to him? He is! And he rejoiced that the gift of salvation had been given to him by his Father to give to whomever he wanted to reveal it to.

The Lord reminded his disciples of their many spiritual blessings. They needed to understand that they had been blessed more than the prophets and kings of old, who had wished to see the glory and power of the Messiah and to hear the wonderful message of redemption being preached to the people of Israel. They had watched generation after generation of male children born in Bethlehem, wondering about each one, "Is this the one?" But now the disciples were not kings like David or prophets like Moses and Elijah or Isaiah and Jeremiah, who had looked forward to the fulfillment in this day, but they really got to see, hear, and experience it. "I am He!" Jesus was saying. And they were only spiritual babes. He wanted them to take in the blessing of his Father that was right in front of them.

If you are willing to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, then allow him to define the calling, define the goals, define the message and ministry, and evaluate the ministry. As a result of this wonderful relationship with the Lord as a son of God and your willingness to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, you can:

- Rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven!
- Rejoice that the Lord uses you to minister in his harvest!
- Rejoice that you are privileged to see truth in our generation that those faithful men of old wished to see and never did!

Every one of us who have come into a relationship with Jesus Christ should ask the Lord to move our hearts to be willing to be discipled. Those of us who have been walking with the Lord for awhile need to be discipling others, teaching them the truth of God, the principles of the ministry; teaching them how to walk by faith, teaching them about their gifts; teaching any young one who comes along. All of us should be in a discipling mode, either receiving or giving, even as the mature believers are always continuing to mature themselves. The trunk of my car is full of tapes from other men! I'm always listening to them to see what I can learn of God. Our staff has men come in from outside and teach us, and we go to conferences all the time so we can be taught to grow more and more. I've been with the Lord 35 years, and I feel like a child when it comes to the mysteries of the kingdom of God! I'm always hungry for more. You should have the same heart, which is given by the Holy Spirit. Are you willing to be discipled? Are you willing to allow the Lord to take your life without conditions and without trying to take it back? I hope so! Follow after Jesus, and he will make you become fishers of men.

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