

The Cost of Discipleship

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What does it mean to be a “Disciple of Christ?” As we read the New Testament biblical narrative, we encounter many who were described as disciples. We may sometimes think first of the twelve Apostles who Jesus called to follow Him as His disciples, and certainly they were. However, there were many others who were also His disciples who submitted themselves to His teaching and often traveled with Him as He went from place to place preaching the Good News, healing the sick and engaging in all manner of ministry prior to His Passion on the Cross of Calvary. The Apostle Paul stated that, in addition to the twelve Apostles, the number of “brothers and sisters” in Christ numbered over five-hundred individuals at the time of Jesus’ resurrection.¹

This is not a trivial question, and may serve to be one of the most important ones in the life of a faithful Christian. “The Hebrew word for disciple, *talmid*, meant ‘one who is taught’.² The word came from the root, *lamed*, which meant ‘to discipline.’ Its meaning ranged from training cattle to preparing troops for war. In the classical Greek and Hellenistic worlds, ‘disciple,’ *mathetes*, was the word for an apprentice. A disciple was one learning a new body of knowledge and/or skills and patterns of behavior.”³ For the most part, discipleship is a New Testament concept. “*Mathetes* does not appear in the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint, abbreviated LXX). The Old

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:6.

² 1 Chronicles 25:8.

³ Halbrook, Gary K., Disciple. *Biblical Illustrator*. 11(3), Spring 1985. p 13.

Testament prophets generally had no disciples.”⁴ “In first-century Jewish society, especially within rabbinic Judaism, the Hebrew word for ‘disciple’ designated a person who was committed to the biblical interpretations and religious traditions that the rabbis taught.”⁵ It is therefore quite reasonable that the most common titles given to Jesus were “Teacher” and “Rabbi”.

All who have placed their faith and trust in God and have accepted the truth of His nature and have also accepted the biblical description of Jesus: Christ and LORD, or in the Hebrew, Messiah and YAHWEH should be characterized as a disciple. To accept Jesus as LORD involves at least one inviolable truth: faith in Him necessitates a sincere and driving desire to be obedient to Him. After all, if there is no desire for obedience and if there is no desire to learn more about the Kingdom of God, then there is no acknowledgement of Jesus as one’s personal LORD, and there is little to separate the nature of one’s faith from that of satan and his minions who have first-hand knowledge of all of Jesus’ nature and purpose.

“In the rabbinic system, the student took the initiative to link up with a respected teacher and his school of interpretation. Furthermore, the task of the learner in the rabbinic model was to receive the rabbi’s teaching and then to pass that teaching along intact as a way to promote the teacher.”⁶ “Ancient Jews expected a disciple to be righteous according to the Mosaic Law. This explains why the scribes and Pharisees grumbled about Jesus’ decision to associate with and issue the call to discipleship to women, sinners, and tax collectors.”⁷ We might

4 Bridges, Linda M., To Be a Disciple. *Biblical Illustrator*. 16(3), Spring 1990. p 17.

5 Tolar, William B., To Be a Disciple. *Biblical Illustrator*. 31(1), Fall 2004. p 59.

6 Weder, Hans. Disciple, Discipleship in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, trans. Dennis Martin, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman. New York, NY: Doubleday 1992. 2:208-209.

7 Kelly, Bobby, To Have Disciples in the First Century. *Biblical Illustrator*. 43(3), Spring 2017. p 96.

think of the Apostle Paul who, as a Pharisee rose to that position following his own traditional Jewish place of authority under the Rabbi Gamaliel.⁸

“During His public ministry, Jesus used the master and disciple model for His followers, and ‘disciple’ was an important designation for the Twelve in whom He chose to invest His life and teachings. Jesus’ calling of His disciples was not typical in the rabbinic tradition where disciples usually sought out the teacher.⁹ Jesus’ calling of His own disciples demonstrated a foreknowledge of the men He called. Even in selecting the traitor, Judas Iscariot, Jesus was fulfilling Old Testament prophecy.”^{10,11} The gospel writers also used the term ‘disciple’ to refer to the larger group of Jesus’ followers¹² and He still calls His disciples today.

Therefore, a true disciple of Christ is one who has a sincere and active desire to be obedient to Jesus. This involves deliberate, active, continual, and consistent learning of the truths of the Gospel that He taught, including the command to separate one’s self from this world culture and adopt a lifestyle of holiness.¹³ A sincere and personal dedication to holiness is not an easy task when virtually every influence in this secular and pagan world and every voice in one’s natural spirit is calling one away from a consistent, holy lifestyle.

Though Jesus did state that His burden is easy,¹⁴ He never said that there would not be a cost of maintaining the integrity of holiness. In fact, there were many instances where Jesus spoke of the very high cost of true discipleship, recorded in

⁸ Acts 22:3.

⁹ John 15:16.

¹⁰ John 17:12.

¹¹ Lane, Hal, Disciples and Apostles. *Biblical Illustrator*. 36(4), Summer 2010. p 20.

¹² Luke 6:13.

¹³ Leviticus 20:7; 1 Peter 1:15-16.

¹⁴ Matthew 11:30.

many locations in each of the gospel narratives. If one is unwilling or uninterested in taking on the full cost of discipleship, then one cannot be His disciple.¹⁵ This latter description of one who calls himself/herself a Christian but lacks the desire for true holiness may be characteristic of the majority of the modern Christian church, and serves as the primary impediment to the church's lack of success in sharing the gospel with the lost world. Consequently, an in-depth study of the nature of true Christian discipleship may serve as a profitable endeavor.

Matthew 19:13-15. *Then were there brought unto him little children, that he should put his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. ¹⁵And he laid his hands on them, and departed thence.*

Prior to Jesus' teaching on the cost of discipleship, He first offered an illustration that serves to bring context to the lessons contained in the parables to follow. Jesus was surrounded by His disciples, and at this time the group included parents with youth and children. The parents wanted to bring their children to Jesus for His blessing, a very reasonable and common ancient custom when one is being introduced to a respected rabbi. They hoped that Jesus would hold them, touch them, comfort them, and pray for them. Likely thinking that Jesus' time was better spent teaching the adults or thinking that children are not as important as the men to whom Jesus was speaking, some criticized and condemned those who were bringing the children and were attempting to stop them. Jesus quickly intervened, commanding that the children be brought to Him so that they may received the desired blessing and used their close presence around Him as His first point of

¹⁵ Luke 14:26-27, 33.

instruction: when one comes to the LORD they must come like a child. There are a few characteristics of the learning processes of a child that differ from those of an adult.

- Children are quick to trust someone who they find kind, caring, and unthreatening
- Children are eager to learn and are quick to believe what they are being taught.
- Children have not yet developed systems of prejudice and intolerance that separate adults.
- Children do not come with a set of presuppositions that serve to limit what they are willing to believe.

One can probably extend this list to include other advantages that children have over adults when it comes to learning something new. When a child is born, the brain is basically a clean slate, understanding only the sounds of the womb and the odor of his/her mother, and as the child grows, he/she quickly becomes familiar with the surrounding environment as the mind begins to interpret their senses, and that clean slate quickly absorbs an incredible amount of knowledge very quickly. Everything is new, and everything that is not threatening is acceptable. Jesus states that this is the way that one should come to God, accepting His instruction without doubt or resistance due to one's presuppositions, desires, and prejudices. He then illustrated some examples of many of the barriers that adults must overcome to come to the LORD in faith and trust, barriers that do not stand in the way of a child.

The importance of this illustration of the true nature of faith is demonstrated by a simple act of Jesus that may be overlooked. Upon blessing the children and the simple statement of the nature of faith, He departed rather than teach those who surrounded Him on the illustration that He had just made. This act alone would cause those who witnessed the event to remember and focus on this one important lesson alone. No additional teaching was necessary.

Matthew 19:16-17. *And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? ¹⁷And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.*

Many, if not most people who do not know the LORD, think that one can be acceptable to God simply by being good, or at least better than average, or better than “bad” people. Many believe that if their good works “outweigh” their sinful works, they will be good enough to be accepted by God and eligible for “entrance” into heaven. However, Jesus is quick to note that there is nobody who is good, except God, Himself. All people, prior to their coming to faith in God are naturally and innately unrighteous¹⁶ and are literally enemies of God.¹⁷ As the Christ, the incarnate YAHWEH, Jesus alone shares that same attribute of goodness that He attributes to God.

Knowing the situation of this man’s heart, Jesus states that for this young man to “enter into life” he must keep the commandments. Knowing this, the natural question that comes to mind is “which commandments must I keep?” Many religions and faith groups find great success in establishing a set of rules, rites, and works that if successfully accomplished will “guarantee” the righteousness of their followers. However, it is not the commandments of men, nor obedience to their rules that God requires, but full, complete, and uncompromised obedience to the commandments of His Word, and we know well that this task is impossible, leaving us all in a state of unrighteousness. Traditionally, all Jews knew that they could not keep all of the commandments, so the typical question is “which of the commandments must I keep so that I can be deemed as righteous?” Even today, we all know the true

¹⁶ Romans 3:23.

¹⁷ Romans 8:6-7.

unrighteousness of the heart, that it is impossible for us to be sinless, so we may be tempted to ask the same question.

Matthew 19:18-20. *He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, ¹⁹Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. ²⁰The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?*

Jesus responded to a disciple's question by citing a few of the Ten Commandments that were common knowledge to all Jewish men, and are likely very familiar with most Christians, and many others, today. It may be interesting to note that Jesus quoted those commandments that relate to our relationship with other people. Jesus was homing in on this man's particular need.

When the young man considered his own state, he sincerely believed that he had kept all these commandments that Jesus cited without any mixture of compromise or error. This misunderstanding of the true application of the Old Testament Law was common to most, if not all, of the Jewish men during the first century, and still is today. Jewish men were quite proud of their success at keeping the Law. However, the Mosaic Law itself states that to break any one of the 613 Jewish commandments¹⁸ makes one a law-breaker and unrighteous.¹⁹ Consequently it is impossible to keep the Law, and thus making it impossible to find righteousness through the keeping of that Law. To illustrate this, Jesus suggests that the young man demonstrate his obedience to the last of these listed: loving others as much as he loves himself. It is the lack

¹⁸ Jewish *Mitzvot*

¹⁹ James 2:10.

of true agape love towards all people that is the greatest barrier to living a righteous life. This is true for all people. We demonstrate that love in a variety of ways, and Jesus points out just one of these to the young man: his lack of generosity and love for others.

Matthew 19:21-22. *Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. ²²But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.*

Though Jesus did not quote the first commandment, that “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,”²⁰ this young man did have something that was far more important to him than the Kingdom of God, illustrated by his lack of generosity towards others. For this man, his love for his possessions was greater than his love for God, and certainly greater than his love for the strangers around him. This lack of true, agape love for others would be the barrier that he would need to overcome before he could give his life to the LORD. He would never be “complete” as long as he was unwilling to love others and make God the greatest priority in his life, which is a fundamental property of true faith. For him, this was a cost of discipleship that he could not bear. To this man, his desire for his material possessions was far greater than his desire to place his faith and trust in the LORD. This is the very definition of idolatry.

This passage is not an imperative that requires us to sell everything that we have and give it to the poor. This misapplication of these verses has been used to take advantage of people by nefarious “Christian” leaders for years. The issue has to do with a cost of discipleship that this person (and those like him) could not accept.

²⁰ Exodus 20:3.

The idea is simple. Our love for the LORD (and our unconditional *agape* love for others) must completely overshadow our love for any or all our possessions, or else following the LORD in obedience will be very difficult, if not impossible.²¹

Matthew 19:23-24. *Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.*

What makes it so difficult for a rich man to find righteousness? The rich often find that they are already sufficiently supplied with what they think are all their needs and have little or no sensitivity to their need for the LORD. Their possessions become their god, and it is in their possessions that they put their faith and trust.

I once worked on a small staff of millionaires, each serving as the CEO of a company, and was quite unmoved by their overwhelming greed. Unwilling to share the largesse of their industry, I found their obsession with their financial accounting spreadsheets less than attractive. They all suffered from an addiction to greed that cost them their families, their peace, and their joy. When I challenged them with the true value of their millions of dollars that sat idle in their huge and swelling bank accounts, they referred to me as a fool. I gladly left their business and the largesse of salary and benefits that they offered and went back to the university and ministry setting where I belonged. Several years later I contacted the company only to find that every one of the partners had passed away,

²¹ One may note that the practice of taking on excessive debt serves as an example of where we have placed our desire for things above our desire for the LORD, particularly when those debts serve to interfere with our godly acts of generosity, stewardship and giving.

taking nothing with them. Their entire adult lives were characterized by excess stress and self-centered greed. They were completely resistant to the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Having spent a year working with these men on a daily basis, an opportunity to share the gospel with them never came. The experience served to bear witness to the difficulty of a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It was their huge investments that they could not carry with them through the eye of the needle. They could not even conceive of the idea of being a disciple of Christ.

Matthew 19:25-26. *When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved? ²⁶But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.*

The disciples quickly realized that virtually all people place a great importance upon their personal possessions, and recognized the extreme difficulty of placing God first in their lives. They understood that to do so, particularly for themselves at this point in their lives was virtually impossible.

There has been much speculation as to the exact meaning of Jesus' "eye of a needle," ranging from some who hold that it is a reference to a crawlspace in the city wall to a literal needle used to sew leather. Others hold to the idea that the Greek word used for camel, *kamelos*, is similar to the word for a ship's cable or large rope, *kamilos*.²² It is this author's opinion that the writer was referring to passing a ship's rope through the eye of a literal needle. In either case, one can understand how it would be impossible for a large rope or camel to pass through an impossibly small space. Yet, as Jesus said, with God all things are possible.

22 Boyd, Timothy N., *Needless Eye*, The . *Biblical Illustrator*. 20(2), Winter 1994. p 37.

Consider the experience of Thomas A'Becket who in the year 1162, at the age of 42 was appointed to the position of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the church of England and the ceremonial head of the Anglican Communion. Becket was a very wealthy man, one of the richest in the country, a son in a very wealthy family. He certainly met the qualification of a "rich man." Both Anglican and Catholic priests held to an Oath of Poverty, necessitating that Becket divest himself of all his possessions, giving them to the poor: a religious requirement based upon a literal interpretation of this passage. He initially found great difficulty in this requirement, and was extremely resistant when called upon to obey this command. However, as he started to witness the amazing impact that his gifts had on the poor as they were so gifted, he became so excited and generous in his giving that he was desperately disappointed when his goods ran out. Much to the disappointment of the crown, Becket's faith in the LORD would continue to grow to where his love for the LORD greatly exceeded his love for a corrupt king and the court that served him. Thomas A'Becket was murdered ten years into his appointment by stewards of the king but was later canonized by both the Anglican and Catholic churches.

With God, all things are possible.

Jesus had provided a few other examples of the cost of discipleship earlier in His ministry:

Matthew 8:19. *And a certain scribe came, and said unto him, Master, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest.*

Once an individual, critical of my understanding of the cost of discipleship declared quite critically that I am one of those, "Lordship Salvationists" who teach that saving faith is characterized by one's accepting Jesus Christ as both Savior and LORD. He argued that it is impossible to truly accept Jesus as one's personal LORD because there will always be things in life that are more important than God. His argument was

virtually identical to that made by the disciples in the previous example. This man, a respected student and teacher of the Bible, was correct in that it was impossible for *him* to do so. He possessed a deep knowledge of the gospel message and declared his own personal salvation on the basis that he sincerely believed it. However, he still considered himself the master of his own destiny and could see no context of placing his faith and trust in God first. I explained to him that even satan and his minions believe, and they tremble.²³ Salvation comes when we step past belief, give up the throne of our own lives, and give it to the LORD. To the lost, this surrender looks like a great, if not impossible, sacrifice. To many, this is too great a cost for discipleship. No manner of testimony would change this individual's mind, and I could only pray that he would come to true faith and would find his knowledge of the Kingdom of God would be illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

If one is committed to the things of this world, commitment to Jesus Christ as LORD does not come easy or cheap. Responses to the gospel message can be divided into two major categories: those who receive the Lordship of Jesus into their hearts, and those who do not. Some make a shallow commitment and continue to "hang around," reaping the benefits of church fellowship but remain unchanged. Others make a deep and full commitment to God and their lives are never the same again. It is this latter community who begin to experience the abundant life that Jesus promised.²⁴ It is these who find the true depths of peace and joy that come from the knowledge that they are securely held in the hands of a living and loving God.²⁵

It is easy to say, "I'll follow you wherever you go." It's quite another act to do it. Here is another true cost of discipleship. True discipleship necessitates a change of life's priorities, a change that many people are simply not ready to make. Jesus

²³ James 2:19.

²⁴ John 10:10.

²⁵ Isaiah 49:16; John 10:28-29.

met a man along the road while He was traveling through Samaria. Matthew 8:19 reveals that this man was a teacher of the law. As a Samaritan, the law that this man teaches would consist of the Pentateuch, and would not be diluted by the traditions and hedge rules of the Jerusalem Jews. The man had met Jesus and desired to be His disciple. To follow Jesus would be for him a very significant choice since it involves adopting Jesus' teachings, his lifestyle, and accepting His authority over that of the law that this young man felt so much comfort in. In a burst of confident commitment, this teacher of the law promised that he would follow Jesus wherever He might lead.

Matthew 8:20. *And Jesus saith unto him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.*

The man said, in an almost boastful and sweeping manner that he was ready to follow Christ. Jesus perceived the lack of true commitment in the man's heart and warned the man that to follow Him would require a step of faith. He would have to leave behind the comfort and security of life as he knew it and take on the risk of the life ahead, trusting in God alone. As a teacher of the Law, this man experienced great respect from the people he taught, a position like the Jewish Pharisee, garnering a respect that brought to him a stable and financially successful career. There was also an innate power over others that was held by the office of a Pharisee. Would he be willing to give this up to follow Jesus? Could he be willing to leave the primacy of the Law behind? Could he leave the career behind? The man would have to change his priorities, depending upon God to provide for his needs, a provision that he had successfully maintained himself. It is evident in the text that this man could not do so and walked away.

What does this say about our pilgrimage as disciples? When we commit to follow Jesus, we must act in faith and simply let

God be our God, our Source, and our Provider. Why did this man apparently reject Jesus? He could not risk losing the comfort and security of his secular lifestyle and step out in faith, possibly experiencing the sufferings that Jesus experienced along with the joys.

Again, this example is not a directive to leave our lives and careers behind to follow Jesus. This desire for his current life was serving to separate himself from obedience to Christ. Discipleship involves bringing our lives and careers under the authority and power of the Holy Spirit. He can and will illuminate our careers so that they can be exercised with God's full blessing. Any teaching that uses this passage to promote a monastic lifestyle is simple heresy.

Matthew 8:21. *And another of his disciples said unto him, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. ²²But Jesus said unto him, Follow me; and let the dead bury their dead.*

Here we see a similar request from another man who Jesus met along the road and one who was probably a Samaritan. In this circumstance we may observe one of the obligations a son had towards his father. These obligations were strong and included the burying of one's own father quickly upon his death. "The son's duty to his father might come into conflict with some of his religious duties. For example, Jews normally were careful to bury people soon after death.²⁶ However, if a man had taken a Nazarite vow, he had to avoid a dead body completely,²⁷ even if it was his father's."²⁸ Sincere dedication to the LORD clearly took priority over obedience to the tenets of the Mosaic Law. This one tenet of the Law serves to help us understand the meaning behind Jesus' response to this man.

²⁶ Deuteronomy 21:23.

²⁷ Numbers 6:6-7.

²⁸ McWilliams, Warren, Burying a Father: A Son's Obligations. *Biblical Illustrator*. 09(2), Winter 1983. p 32.

It appears at first that Jesus' response was a bit harsh, but as we look at the context of the situation and ancient near-eastern culture, another very important truth is revealed. *This man was not grieving the recent death of his father.* If his father had just died the man would be with his family attending to the responsibilities appropriate to the situation. He would not be on the country roads speaking to Jesus. Actually, the words used by the man in his defense form a common Hebrew idiom that refers to the tradition of staying close to one's father, expectantly awaiting his death so that an inheritance can be received. This man feared that by following Jesus he could risk losing his inheritance. There is no indication in this passage that the father was anywhere close to death, and the use of the idiom reinforces this possibility. This, and the responsibility for the man to "bury his father" that overshadowed by a sincere vow to dedicate oneself to the LORD both serve to illustrate the true, self-serving motives of this man.

Understanding this, Jesus' response may make more sense. This man clearly placed the priority of family and inheritance over the Kingdom of God. Worldly inheritance will always remain in the possession of worldly people. Those who chase after the inheritance, the mammon of this world, will be the ones who receive it, and upon receiving, fail to receive the true inheritance that only God gives to those who trust in Him: eternal life. Jesus called upon the man to "Go and proclaim the kingdom of God."²⁹ The implication by the word "Go" is that he is to leave the old world behind. He would have to leave his father and trust God rather than trust in his inheritance.

The first Samaritan valued the security and comfort of his possessions so much that it stood in the way of following Jesus. This second man's commitment was to his future inheritance of the things of this world. Note that in their day, the "inheritance" was a specific and primary valued thing. It had ties to their ancestry, their progeny, and served to define who

²⁹ The writer of Luke 9:60 adds this to his testimony of the event.

they were. The man would have to dramatically change his priorities, and even his self-identity if he were to risk his father's inheritance. It might be interesting to note that modern, practicing Jews who come to understand and believe that Jesus is the Messiah and turn to Him in faith are almost always disinherited or shunned by their families, and some have referred to their Jewish Christian relatives as "dead" to them. The cost of discipleship is real. However, it is a great cost only if the things of this world hold too high a place of importance in the person's heart.

We find another illustration of the cost of discipleship in the Gospel of Luke:

Luke 9:61. And another also said, LORD, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house.

What happened to this third man? Note he said, "let me first..." He could not place Jesus first in his life. Where the second man wanted to delay his discipleship for an extended period, this third man wanted to delay it only for a short period, but in a way that would bring him personal reward. This delay would be used so that he could return home for a formal farewell where he would be honored by his family and friends in a party that could last for a few days. He would then have the opportunity to receive some, or all of his inheritance, to bring with him to support himself on the road.³⁰ This man revealed that his heart was still committed first to his home, his family, and the resources they hold. The call of Jesus could not be the first priority in his life. Wanting to look back now, his desire would always be to return to his pagan home and its lifestyle. Again, this man was not fully committed to his decision to follow Christ.

"Rather than minimize the commitment required in order to maximize His number of followers, Jesus set the bar high and

³⁰ See Luke 15:11-32.

demanded supreme loyalty. To the crowds, He articulated the requirements for being his disciple:"³¹

Luke 14:26. *If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.*

Of course, Jesus is not presenting a doctrine that is in conflict with the Commandment to honor one's father and mother. This is not in any way a command to suspend our love for our family and replace it with hate. Our understanding of the word that is translated as "hate" is important. The idea highlights the contrast between one's commitment to his family and his commitment to the LORD. Simply put, "a prospective disciple is worthy of Jesus only if he is willing to put Jesus first."³² The true benefit is that, by placing the LORD first in our lives, the resource we have to love our family grows.

Luke 9:62. *And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.*

What was Jesus' response to this man's desire to return home before following Him? When we make the commitment to follow Jesus, like the plowman, we cannot look back. What happens when a plowman turns around and looks back? As he guides the plow with one hand and the beast of burden with the other, balancing both as he focuses on the end of the furrow, he would lose orientation if he were to look back. With the target out of sight, the furrow would soon be crooked, negatively affecting the planting of the entire field. The same analogy today might apply to riding a bicycle. Imagine the task of riding a bicycle on a path that is only slightly wider than the tires. This can be done quite easily if the focus on the path is maintained.

31 Kostenberger, Andreas J., Jesus on Discipleship. *Biblical Illustrator*. 46(4), Summer 2020. p 28.

32 Ibid.

However, what will happen when the rider takes his eyes off the path and looks back? Maintaining the bike in the narrow path is virtually impossible.

True Christians leave behind a lifestyle and perspective that is characterized only in sin. What happens if we look back? We are often tempted and may lose focus on our objective of consistent obedience to the LORD. One of the shorter verses in the book of Luke is:

Luke 17:32. *Remember Lot's wife!*

What happened to Lot's wife? Lot and his wife "enjoyed" a riotous and ungodly pagan lifestyle in a riotous and ungodly city. Because of the prayers of Abraham, God spared Lot and his family by commanding their evacuation from Sodom prior to its destruction as a judgment for its ungodliness.³³ God commanded Lot and his family not to look back upon Sodom as they were leaving. This command was not as related to a visual glimpse back as it was to the consistent attitude of their heart. Lot's wife looked back to Sodom when she grieved its loss, fully desiring to return to the lifestyle of that city. She was in full rebellion of her husband who was taking her away. Her heart's true desire was only for Sodom, and her true desire conflicted with that of her husband and the command of the LORD. Her rebellion against the LORD resulted in her destruction. In the same way, a commitment to the LORD is a commitment to leave behind the ungodliness of this wicked world. None of these men who met Jesus could do it. Many who call themselves Christians today have been similarly encumbered in their commitment, and find their experience burdened by their sin, and lack the power of God in their lives. Leaving behind the things of this world is extremely difficult, if not impossible for those who love them.

Matthew 19:27. *Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all,*

³³ Genesis 19:24-25.

and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?

Having clearly heard the state of those who could not put Jesus first in their lives, and the necessity of “leaving” home and family, the Apostles and the disciples came to consider their own commitment to the LORD. Peter, likely speaking for himself as well as the other Apostles, asked Jesus about the veracity of their own sacrifice. They sincerely believed that they had left behind everything to follow Jesus. They did not regret the life they left behind, only looking forward to being close to Jesus as the future would unfold before them. They did not consider returning to their lives prior to their decision to follow Jesus. Their commitment to the living LORD was complete and it was sincere.

Matthew 19:28-30. And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. ³⁰But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.

Jesus told the Apostles that their commitment to Him is sincere indeed, and that they will receive the reward for their faithfulness. Peter was correct in his own evaluation of his commitment to the LORD. Unlike the earlier examples of those who could not leave their families, the Apostles had all done so and seemingly did so without question or compromise. Likewise, we can all look at our own lives and assess the level of commitment that we have made to the LORD. With the examples of the four men who came to Jesus and were turned

away, each had something in their lives that was more important to them than their commitment to the LORD. Many today are unable to turn to the LORD in faith because they are simply unwilling to give to Him the faith, trust, and commitment that He deserves.

It is important to note that Jesus was not setting down a law through these four examples. Jesus told the first to sell all that he had because it was a love for possessions that kept this man from salvation. This does not mean that we are to sell all we have to find salvation. However, if our possessions are standing in the way of our acceptance of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, then they are a similar barrier. In the same way each of the four men had something that was uniquely standing before them as a barrier to faith and trust in God and each can be instructive to us as we consider the barriers to the full expression of our faith.

This passage started with Jesus' example of how easy it is for a child to trust in others. As we have become adults, we have filled our lives with the flotsam and jetsam, the wood, hay, and stubble³⁴ of this world that can become a distraction to our faith in God. Even as people of faith, we can become more obsessed with the color of the carpet in our sanctuary than we are with our love for others in the body of believers.

The power of true discipleship cannot be understated, and this power is exhibited in the lives of the Apostles. "By becoming Jesus disciples, these twelve men experienced a total life change! From common fishermen and tax collectors, they became instruments of God's power to change the world. They lived differently, spoke differently, and died differently (almost all of them became martyr(s)). But their lives, testimonies, examples, and writings (Gospels and Letters) God has used to convert millions of other people from unbelief to saving faith, from being lost pagans to being saved disciples. Their becoming

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:12.

disciples changed their lives and many others for both time and eternity.”³⁵ Historic records of the time period actually contain very little information about these disciples, with few records found outside of the scriptures and early Christian histories. “After all, the Christian faith is about God and His actions, not the accomplishments of men. What we do know testifies that being associated with Jesus profoundly altered the course of their lives. They were never the same again.”³⁶

There is a great cost of discipleship only when we put great value on the things of this world. However, when we come to faith in the LORD, as He brings wisdom and perspective into our lives, we find that the allure of the things of this world begins to fade away. That which is of God becomes far more important than the things of this world, and we will find that we can truly place our faith and trust in the LORD Jesus, Christ rather than place it in this world. It is then that we will find the reward that Jesus promised to Peter, a reward that starts even now with the abundant life that Jesus promised,³⁷ a life that is abundant in the love, peace, and joy that is found in a spirit that is immersed in the LORD.

³⁵Tolar, William B., To Be A Disciple. *Biblical Illustrator*. 31(1), Fall 2004. p 61.

³⁶Boyd, Timothy N., The Disciples in History and Tradition. *Biblical Illustrator*. 23(1), Fall 1996. p 34.

³⁷John 10:10.