

## Why Bother With Discipleship?

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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!" (*I Call It Heresy*, Harrisburg, PA.: Christian Publications, 1974, p. 5f) 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<sup>1</sup>) 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<sup>2</sup>)

**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<sup>3</sup>) and "makes the tree good" (Matt. 12:33<sup>4</sup>). As we study with Jesus we increasingly become on the inside--with

"the Father who is in secret" (Matt 6:6<sup>5</sup>)--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<sup>6</sup>)

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<sup>7</sup>) Other such passages easily come to mind, such as II Peter 1:4-11<sup>8</sup>, I Cor. 13<sup>9</sup>, and Romans 5:1-5<sup>10</sup>.

"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<sup>11</sup>)

**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<sup>12</sup>) 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<sup>13</sup>) 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<sup>14</sup>) 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!"

## Scriptures:

**<sup>1</sup>John 8:34** Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

**<sup>2</sup>John 8:36** So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

**<sup>3</sup>Matthew 23:25** "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

**<sup>4</sup>Matthew 12:33** "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit.

**<sup>5</sup>Matthew 6:6** But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

**<sup>6</sup>Luke 12:1** Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: "Be[a] on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

**<sup>7</sup>Galatians 5:22** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control

**<sup>8</sup>2 Peter 1: 4-11** Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. **5** For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; **6** and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; **7** and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. **8** For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. **9** But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. **10** Therefore, my brothers and sisters,[a] make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, **11** and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

**<sup>9</sup>1 Corinthians 13** If I speak in the tongues[a] of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. **2** If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. **3** If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast,[b] but do not have love, I gain nothing. **4** Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. **5** It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. **6** Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. **7** It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. **8** Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. **9** For we know in part and we prophesy in part, **10** but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. **11** When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. **12** For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. **13** And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

<sup>10</sup>**Romans 5:1-5** Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2** through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we[b] boast in the hope of the glory of God. **3** Not only so, but we[c] also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; **4** perseverance, character; and character, hope. **5** And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

<sup>11</sup>**Philippians 3** Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. **2** Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. **3** For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh — **4** though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: **5** circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; **6** as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.**7** But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. **8** What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ**9** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in[a] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. **10** I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11** and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. **12** Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. **13** Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, **14** I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**15** All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. **16** Only let us live up to what we have already attained. **17** Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.**18** For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. **19** Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. **20** But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, **21** who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

<sup>12</sup>**Matthew 28:18** Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

<sup>13</sup>**Acts 10:38** how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

<sup>14</sup>**Ephesians 1:19** and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength