

A Study of Discipleship by Max Frazier, Jr.

One of the catchwords in evangelical churches today is that of discipleship. As one walks through the aisles of any Christian bookstore hundreds of titles on the topic of discipleship greet him or her. Most of these books focus attention upon either how to become a disciple or how to disciple another person. But, how interested are we in really pursuing what discipleship means?

This series of three articles explores different facets of this subject and will challenge you to think seriously about what it means to be a disciple and to disciple others.

The Call of Discipleship

Once a man attended a fair and saw another man leading a fine, well-groomed horse. He inquired, Is that a saddle horse? The other replied, No, sir. This horse will buck off a saddle. Nothing can stay on his back.

"Is he a driving horse, then? the man asked. No, he was hitched up once and made kindling wood of the vehicle he should have pulled.

Well, what is he good for? Why is he here? The answer was, Style, man, style. Just look at the picture he makes.

Once I was in a church building and saw people clad in fine clothes coming into the morning service. I asked the preacher, Are those people workers in the church? No, he answered sadly. Do they visit the sick and minister to the poor? Do they attend other services of the church? Never, he answered.

Theres that horse, I said to myself, Nothing but style.

In his well written book, *The Divine Conspiracy* (to be reviewed later in this issue), Dr. Dallas Willard defines discipleship this way. A disciple, or apprentice, is simply someone who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is. He further states, And as a disciple of Jesus I am with him, by choice and by grace, learning from him how to live in the kingdom of God. This is the crucial idea. That means, we recall, how to live within the range of Gods effective will, his life flowing through mine. Another important way of putting this is to say that I am learning from Jesus to live my life as he would live my life if he were I. I am not necessarily learning to do everything he did, but I am learning how to do everything I do in the manner that he did all that he did.

That last statement really has impacted my life. Am I desiring to learn how to do everything that I do being a husband to my wife, a father to my children, a

grandfather to my grandchildren, a Bible teacher to my students in a manner like that of Jesus as He did all that He did? That question has not been asked of me before. It is a concept that I have not heard proclaimed from too many pulpits in recent years. Yet, as I really ask myself that above stated question, I am forced to rethink who I am and why I am here. And, that, I believe, is the essence of discipleship.

I would like to begin a three-part series on discipleship. In this issue our focus will be upon Gods call. In succeeding issues we will examine the themes of cross bearing and the crowns awarded to disciples.

Follow Christ

Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of men.
Mark 1:17

Why should I choose to follow Jesus? Why would anyone want to follow this man who lived two thousand years ago? The Bible tells us of two reasons. First, Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father. I am reminded of that truth expressed in John 14:6 Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. And yet how persistent most people are in wanting to assist God in their salvation. Perhaps my good works will help me. Perhaps my attendance in church services will help me. But only Christ will save us only Christ.

Why should I choose to follow Jesus? Second, because Jesus has never failed. He has never sinned. He has never erred. This truth is found expressed so clearly in Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are yet was without sin. If we follow Him we know that He will lead us through because He has traveled the same road victoriously.

How should I follow Christ? I must be careful not to run ahead of God. In Exodus 2, there is the story of how Moses, feeling compassion for his people Israel in their bondage and slavery, attempted to become their great deliverer. But all he did was to make a mess of things. Why? Because God was not ready for Israel to be set free, and He certainly did not want it to appear as coming through the strength and position of Moses. Moses, the adoptive son of Pharaohs daughter, could not be a deliverer, but Moses, the fugitive shepherd from Midian, could be. I must follow in the footsteps of Jesus; He must never follow in mine.

Fear Not

Then Jesus said to Simon, Dont be afraid; from now on you will catch men.
Luke 5:10

Jesus gave the above statement to a very frightened Simon Peter. You might

remember that Jesus had preached a sermon from Peter's boat, and afterwards had encouraged Peter to catch some fish even in broad daylight. This miraculous catch of fish had frightened this mighty fisherman. He knelt and grabbed Jesus around the knees and begged Him to depart. Jesus then encourages Peter to not be afraid. He then commissions him to become a fisher of men.

One of the great barriers to effective discipleship is fear. There is this sense that if we really are sold out for God, then He will either ask us to do something or invite us to become something that we do not either want to do or to become. I remember the hesitation I experienced in totally surrendering my life to Jesus Christ because I did not want to either go to India as a missionary or to become a pastor. (It is interesting that God called me into the pastoral ministry for over twenty-six years, and in recent years I have been privileged to travel to India twice representing the Village Schools).

The solution to the problem of fear is the knowledge that Christ is with us. If all I have to rely upon is my own strength, my own resources, then I have a justified cause for fear because I do know my weaknesses, my own limitations. But, knowing that Christ is with me, allows me to echo those words of the Apostle Paul, What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31).

I am reminded of the story of Joshua, as recorded for us in the first chapter of the book that bears his name. Joshua is rightfully afraid. He has been in the land and knows what lies before them walled cities, well-equipped armies, and giants. Although his own army had been successful on a couple of occasions during their forty years of wandering, they still were more content to be shepherd who grumbled against God to their leadership. As he looked at himself, Joshua knew that he had neither resources nor even the physical energy to accomplish the victories necessary. Then we hear God proclaim this good news, Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:9).

How did Jesus walk on this earth while doing the ministry given to Him? It was with the absence of fear. He knew that His Father was with Him. So, too, we can walk without fear knowing that our Father is with us.

Fish for Men

Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of men.
Mark 1:1

I am privileged to live in a state where being a fisherman is almost a prerequisite for citizenship. Every Friday afternoon, I can gaze out my office window in my home and watch thousands of vehicles, many pulling boats, traveling north up I-94 going to the lakes in northern Minnesota. For what reason? Fishing. Now, I have

never been a very successful fisherman to be honest with you, I have had no success at all. I can catch mosquitoes and many forms of algae but of fish I don't even get a nibble. I can even be with others who are catching fish. But I don't even close. But, as someone told me, what you don't catch, you don't have to clean.

Yet, as I have visited with those who are expert fishermen, I have gleaned from them some thoughts as to what is necessary for the disciple of Jesus Christ to catch men. First, a good fisherman always has a tackle box full of bait. They come in about as many colors as make up the spectrum. Each has its different purpose. You don't catch walleyes with bait designed for bass, and you don't catch bass with bait designed for crappies. The bait that God has given to us is that of His Word. Yet His Word is used in differing ways to catch men for Christ. With some it comes through the teaching of the Word, for others through its rebuking of their errors. God is pleased to take His Word and to minister it to others in ways that impact their lives for His glory. The recipients know the reality of Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Second, a good fisherman needs lots of patience. There are those days when it seems that nothing you do brings success. You go home with your stringer empty. But a dedicated fisherman will get up the next morning, head for the lake with optimism in hand, and go after those elusive big ones. Very few times have I visited with fishermen and had them relate how the fish almost literally jumped into the boat; most of the time it took hours to catch the limit. That is patience.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that we are to run with patience the race that is set out before us (Hebrews 12:1). One does not become a disciple of Jesus Christ overnight. It is a lifetime vocation. It demands patience. As someone said, The Christian life is not a sprint it is a marathon. To be successful in running a marathon a runner needs a disciplined patience. That is true also of the Christian life.

The final necessary requirement for successful fishing is to know where the fish are. A year ago Marlys and I were privileged to speak on a Sunday morning at a small church located on the shores of one of Minnesota's largest lakes. We stayed overnight at one of the resorts along its shores. One of the things we noticed that was available through this resort was guided fishing expeditions on the lake. These guides knew where the fish were, thus making the fishing venture more successful at least that was the theory.

I began to ask myself, Who are the fish that God has brought into my life? Who are those to whom He has asked me to share my story? The Apostle Paul certainly knew those fish that God had brought into his life Epaphras, Barnabas, Silas, Epaphroditus, Aquila and Priscilla, Dr. Luke, Aristarchus, and of course Timothy. Among his final admonitions to Timothy were these: And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be

qualified to teach others (Second Timothy 2:2). In other words, Timothy know those fish that God has brought into your life and share with them as I have shared with you.

Closing Application

Friends, what has God called His children to do? He has not commanded us to win converts to Christ. You and I cannot convert anyone to Jesus. Only the Father, through the drawing of His Spirit, can do that. Furthermore, He has not commanded us to bring people into the Church as members. But, He has commanded and empowered us to do two things be His witnesses and to make disciples:

Acts 1: 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Matthew 28:19-20 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.

Perhaps it is time that we begin to take more seriously this injunction to make disciples. It is not going to happen unless we are intentional about it.

The Cost of Discipleship

In 1937 Dietrich Bonhoeffer first published his classic book titled, The Cost of Discipleship. At the time of its publication, Germany was going through some dramatic changes. Adolf Hitler had usurped power within the German Reichstag and had laid plans for his conquest of the world. Included in his plans were the elimination of all those people groups - including Jews, gypsies, the deformed and disabled that were inferior, at least according to his standards. Caught in between was the Church. Would it follow the new national leadership that was bringing Germany out of the economic chaos created by World War I, or would it continue to abide by the teachings of the Word of God? Pastor Bonhoeffer chose to become part of what came to be known as the Confessing Church, was accused of being part of a plot to assassinate Hitler, was imprisoned and eventually hanged just prior to the Allied liberation of Germany. I have read this book several times and have been stimulated and challenged by it on every occasion. I would recommend it to you.

What did Jesus say?

Basically, Bonhoeffer states that it is our desire to look for ease of following Jesus. But Jesus never promised us ease. This is what Jesus said, If anyone would come

after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? (Luke 9:23-25). Jesus identified two things that must occur if we are to follow Him. Both of them seem to run counter to twenty-first century thought.

First, Jesus said that we must deny ourselves. Notice: Jesus did not give this as an option. He did not say something like, It might be good if you would deny yourself or I think you should deny yourself. No, Jesus said denying ourselves was an imperative it was something we must do. But, what does it mean to deny yourself? The word deny has as one of its meanings, to refuse to recognize; disown; repudiate (Websters New World Dictionary of the American Language). Jesus is saying that I must refuse to recognize myself; that I must disown myself; that I must repudiate myself. Now, in this day of emphasis upon self-esteem, this appears to deflate our esteem.

But, I dont think Jesus is saying that I lay down on the floor and let everyone walk over me, or that I must think so lowly of myself that I feel like a grasshopper in the sights of a bird. Jesus is saying that I must reach that point where I look at myself and my own efforts of trying to achieve salvation and realize that I cannot do it. There is nothing I can do to appease the anger and judgment that emanate from a holy God. I must disown my efforts; I must repudiate those desires that encourage me to keep trying to please God.

Second, Jesus says we must take up our cross daily. Unfortunately, in twenty-first century Christianity, at least the type practiced in the United States, the cross has become a symbol that is worn on a golden chain around the neck, fastened to the bumper of a car, or adorn the steeples of our churches. Now I am not criticizing how we use the cross. But the cross worn around the neck of my wife was not the cross Jesus was talking about. If you and I were standing there with that first century crowd listening to Jesus, and He mentioned taking up a cross, we might shudder with fear. For the cross was an instrument of torture and death. Its beams were stained with the blood of the crucified. The air around it was filled with the curses and screams of those who were being executed. To take up ones cross meant death for the one carrying the cross.

I must not only deny myself, but I must be crucified. I must die to self. Until I am willing to do both Jesus does not give us the option of either denying ourselves or taking up our cross I cannot follow Jesus. I cannot be His disciple.

What might it cost me?

So, I decide to deny myself and to take up my cross daily and want to follow Jesus. Now, it becomes an easy way, right? Wrong! Luke 14:26 records these words of

Jesus, If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters yes, even his own life he cannot be my disciple. This is one of those teachings of Jesus that we seldom consider. I thought Jesus told us to love one another, in fact, the world would know we are His because of our love. What did Jesus mean when He commanded us to hate our family members if we wanted to be His disciples? I believe Jesus is saying that we must have a greater priority love for Jesus than we have for our families. Jesus must come before my children, my parents, my wife, and even my own desires. Jesus is saying that when my love for my family is compared with my love for Him, it would appear that I hated my family as my love for Jesus would be that strong. In his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes, concerning this passage: The entire point of this passage is that as long as one thinks anything may really be more valuable than fellowship with Jesus in his kingdom, one cannot learn from him.

This truth was clearly illustrated to me during one of my pastorates. I was invited to a home where the youngest daughter was leaving for Zaire as a missionary. Her parents were getting older and her brothers and sisters were not close by. I was asked to come and pray for the safe arrival of the barrels that would carry Betty's possessions to Africa. I could sense that it was difficult for her parents to let her go. Yet I will never forget her Mother's words to me: Pastor, We gave Betty to the Lord when she was a little girl. How can we say no to what God has called her to? They had experienced the cost of discipleship.

Second, Luke relates the story of Jesus and a rich young leader that he records in Luke 18:18-23. There we read: A certain ruler asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother. All these I have kept since I was a boy, he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. What cost was this rich young leader facing? It was that of his personal finances and possessions. He did not want to part with what he had. Many of us struggle with giving up what we own. Jesus was not saying that possessions were wrong, but clinging to them tenaciously was. It was Corrie ten Boom who prayed that God would cause her to hold things loosely so that it would be less painful if God should take them away. Corrie ten Boom had experienced the cost of discipleship.

Finally, Jesus relates in Luke 9:16 these words, Still another said, I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family. Now, at first this seems like a simple request. Why should not one be allowed to have a farewell? But at least one commentator explained this verse as being of a young man who wanted to explain to his friends what he was doing so they would not be mad at him. He was concerned about his reputation among his friends. He was still seeking approval and wanting acceptance. But Jesus said that our focus should be upon

Jesus and not upon the approval of others.

A few years ago I was in Poland and had the opportunity of visiting with a young man who had recently given his heart to the Lord. He was a skilled weight-lifter and had as a goal to represent Poland on its Olympic weight-lifting team. However, upon his coming to Christ, he was given an ultimatum by his high school weight-lifting coach to either give up his Christianity or his weight-lifting. As I visited with him, he said, Max, it was probably the most difficult decision I have ever made. But I could not turn my back upon Jesus. This young man knew the cost of discipleship.

Why should it cost us anything?

A better question would be: Why should it not cost us anything? After all, it cost Jesus Christ everything. It cost Him the riches of glory. The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians, Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped (Philippians 2:6). Jesus gave up all the glories of heaven. He became poor so that we might become rich. Jesus knew what it was to give up possessions that rightfully belonged to Him.

It cost Jesus His friends, for we read in Matthew 26:56 these words: But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples deserted him and fled. When Jesus needed them the most, His disciples turned and fled because of fear. Jesus faced his accusers alone. Jesus knew what it meant to have friends forsake you.

It cost Jesus a break in His relationship with His Father. One is drawn to those words of Jesus upon the cross: About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46). The cost of our salvation included a separation of Jesus from His Father because of our sins.

It cost Jesus His life. John relates it this way: When he had received the drink, Jesus said, It is finished. With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30). Could God ever ask us to give up our life to follow Him? Ask a William Tyndale. Ask a John Hus. Ask a Jim Elliot or a Nate Saint. Ask a Martin Burnham.

Perhaps it is this strong teaching about the cost of discipleship that keeps us from proclaiming it with authority. The Church today is gaining converts. But is it making disciples? It is practicing evangelism. But is it focusing equal energies upon disciple-making? Yes, it is great to know I am on the way to heaven - evangelism. But I want to realize that abundant life Jesus came to give me now - discipleship.

Someone has written these prophetic words: A religion that does nothing, gives nothing, costs nothing, sufferings nothing is worth nothing. Perhaps it is time I ask myself this question: Has my walk with Jesus Christ cost me anything? If the answer is no, then I need to ask myself why? Perhaps I have not denied myself. Or I

have not taken up my cross daily, dying to my own wishes and desires, instead of praying that His will would be accomplished through me. Discipleship it is easy to talk about, but it is difficult to practice. God did not call us to the life of a convert, but to the life of a disciple.

The Crown of Discipleship

Discipleship is the buzz-word in evangelical churches today. Nearly every church has its program of discipleship. Dozens of books have been written and several seminars have been developed to both inspire would-be disciples and to train them. The focus is upon discipleship because that is what Jesus commanded us to do, for you remember His words to the eleven as He was about to be taken into glory: Therefore go and make disciples of all nations(Matthew 28:19). Now, we may not be certain exactly what that command means, but we will proceed in obedience.

In our first article on discipleship (July 2003), we examined the call to discipleship. It began with a command to follow Jesus: Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of men (Mark 1:17). We choose to follow Jesus because He is the only way to God (John 14:6) and because He has set before us an unblemished example to follow (Hebrews 4:15). It continued with an encouragement to not be afraid: Then Jesus said to Simon, Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men (Luke 5:10). Fear is one of the great barriers to effective discipleship, yet that barrier can be torn down when we think that Christ is with us (Romans 8:31). Finally, the call concluded with the goal of reaching men and women for Christ (Mark 1:17).

In the second article (September 2003), we discovered that discipleship came with a cost. Jesus never promised us an easy way. He talked about taking up crosses and losing lives and denying selves (Luke 9:23-25). He told of being hated by the world (John 15:18-20), and of being persecuted by the world (Matthew 5:10-12). He said He came to bring the sword and to cause family disruptions (Matthew 10:34-36). To be a true follower of Jesus a disciple, more than just a believer demands that we consider the cost. Just as an army general had better consider the cost of going into battle, or a contractor the cost of building a skyscraper, so we, too, are admonished to consider the cost of entering into a relationship with One who paid a tremendous price for our salvation One who knew the cost.

Is there any fruit, any reward, any crown that accompanies discipleship? That will be our focus for this final article. We begin with Jesus words in Mark 10:29-30. I tell you the truth, Jesus replied, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields and with them persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. That was Jesus answer to a question posited by Peter desiring to know just what he should expect to get by following Jesus.

A few years ago I copied the following poem that encouraged my own heart. I share it with you as we begin our study. I don't know who the author is, but I know he has blessed many hearts with his words.

Who does God's work will get God's pay,

However long may seem the day,

However weary be the way.

Though powers and princes thunder, Nay!

No human hand God's hand can stay;

Who does His work will get His pay.

He does not pay as others pay,

In gold, or land, or raiment gay,

In goods that perish and decay.

But God's high wisdom knows a way;

And this is sure, let come what may,

Who does God's work will get God's pay.

The first reward or crown is that of our eternal life. To truly know Jesus Christ and to follow Him results in receiving eternal life. Listen to this testimony from the pen of the Apostle Paul: What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ (Philippians 3:8). As Paul looked back over his life and it had been a full and rich life, full of privileges and opportunities accorded to only a few in his day he concluded that those things paled when compared with his new life in Christ. In fact, those things were as valuable as manure when compared to the life he had in Christ. You might want to

say to Paul, But you gave up so much! And his reply would be, But what I gained was of infinitely more value than what I gave up. The Apostle Paul had counted the cost and considered the value of following Christ Jesus better than following his own dreams and goals.

A second reward or crown, and probably one that we most desire to focus upon, is that of the blessings of God. We think of those to whom God has increased material blessings; of Abraham, of whom it was said that he was very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold (Genesis 13:2). Or of a Job who, after persevering through the trials accorded him by God, received double blessings from God (Job 42:10-17). One can also think of those in our present world, blessed abundantly by God with material possessions, who have been used by God to help with many ministries. But, God does not always choose to bless His disciples in this manner. He certainly never rewarded His earthly disciples James, John, Peter, and the rest in this way. (In fact, James was the first of the disciples to die; hardly seems like a blessing).

But God has promised to bless us spiritually. A favorite verse of mine is Ephesians 1:3, where Paul encouraged the believers in that growing church that they had been blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. He then proceeded to identify just a few of those blessings: being chosen by God before the foundation of the world (Wow! So remarkable that I cannot comprehend it!); being adopted into the family of God (Wow! God chose me to be His child!); of being redeemed and forgiven (Wow! I am liberated from the bondage to sin!); and of possessing an inheritance for all eternity (Wow! I am indeed rich!)

Friends, perhaps it is time that you and I take an hour or so and begin to list on a piece of paper all that is ours in Christ Jesus. These are the crowns of following Him in obedience.

Finally, God is preparing a fantastic place for us where we can spend all of eternity with Him. Jesus, before leaving His disciples, gave them this promise: In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am (John 14:2-3). One can hardly envision what heaven will be like and of the One who will greet us upon our arrival. Perhaps the following story will minister to your heart as it did to mine:

A small boy sat quietly in a seat of the day coach on a train running between two of the Western cities in the United States. It was a hot, dusty day, very uncomfortable for traveling and that particular ride was perhaps the most uninteresting days journey in the whole land. But the little fellow sat patiently watching the fields and the fences hurrying by, until a motherly old lady, leaning forward, asked sympathetically, Arent you tired of the long ride, dear, and the dust and the heat? The lad looked up brightly, and replied, with a smile, Yes, maam, a little. But I dont

mind it much because my father is going to meet me when I get to the end of it.

At times when we are tempted to complain because of the journey and often there is much about which to complain we should pause and focus upon the One who will greet us upon our arrival. To be greeted with His warm embrace and to hear His words, Well done, faithful servant, will be reward enough, dont you agree?

Peter, you might receive some material blessings because you have chosen to follow Me. More likely, you will receive some persecutions experience some hatred from others. But, Peter, you will receive spiritual blessings that will fill your life with purpose and meaning. And, I will be there awaiting your arrival when you get home.

So, we may ask Peter, was following Jesus worth it? I believe he would respond as did the Apostle Paul, Absolutely, everything else was as valuable as manure. They understood the call to discipleship and accepted the cost associated with following Jesus. And they experienced the crowns that came when Jesus Christ was the Lord and Master of their lives. May that be true of us as well.