

## **If You Would Be My Disciples – Part 2**

This summer we've explored the reality of the Church as the second incarnation of Christ, The Word becoming flesh and blood again, this time our flesh and our blood. We have been looking at Christ's teachings to better understand how we should live if we are to be his presence in the world today. Christ talks about what it means to be his disciples often in the gospels. His teaching is challenging, sometimes it is even intimidating. We've lived in a time of relatively easy faith, not a faith that costs us much in this world, but rather one that promises us much in this world. That kind of faith may attract crowds to the church, but that is not incarnational faith, being Christ in this world.

This is not a new problem. In Jesus' day crowds followed Jesus to see a good show, to cash in on the potential benefits. They were less interested in following Jesus, than they were in using Jesus. They were less about getting what Jesus wanted to give, than about getting Jesus to give what they wanted. It's the same today. Believe and you'll succeed, your business will profit, your marriage will flourish, you health will be good, and most important, your team will win more games etc. But Jesus wasn't looking for disciples who were looking for a good deal. He wanted disciples who were looking for truth, for life. And so to this eager crowd he preached a hard message. "Count the cost before you decide to follow me. If you are not willing to deny yourself and take up your own cross, you

cannot be my disciple.” When Jesus preached that sermon, many in the crowd, most in the crowd, started shopping somewhere else. They were following Jesus to enhance their life not to lose it, to avoid suffering, not invite it.

Following Jesus will enhance our life. The Psalmist did not lie when he wrote, “Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord... He is like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers” (Ps 1:2,3). But there’s a difference between the fruit of righteousness and the fruit of prosperity. If one has to make a choice between the two, it would be a mistake to choose prosperity. Jesus knows that if people follow him, not because of him, but because of the benefits they think they can get from him, when the benefits go, they will go too. The real benefit Jesus offers is not business success or marital bliss, not healthier checkups or longer win streaks. The real benefit Jesus offers is a personal relationship with the God of the Universe, our creator. If we must choose between the benefits of success in the world or the blessings of a relationship with God, he wants disciples who will choose the latter. So he lets us know up front. No guarantee that following him will not cost us family, friends, wealth, health even life. If he is not worth more to us than that, its not that we cannot be disciples, it’s that we will not be.

After that sermon most turn around and leave. To the few that stayed Jesus asks, “Will you leave too?” It was Peter who answered for all the disciples, “Where would we go? You’re the one!” That’s the answer Jesus wants to hear. We’re in it for the long haul. We’ll follow you no matter what. We’re not sure we can, but unlike those who clearly don’t want to follow you, we want to follow you. To these few who stayed he gives the secret to discipleship, nowhere more clearly taught than in (Jn 15:1-8).

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful... No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*

*I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

The core of discipleship is learning to live a new kind of life in this world. Following Jesus is not a decision we make to get into heaven when we die; it is a decision we make to get heaven into us while we are alive. Jesus says its like a

vine bearing fruit. Disciples are like branches on a vine. Branches bear the fruit produced by the vine, if they don't they are cut off. They are frequently pruned back to bear more. The reason branches are cut off or pruned back is because there is no purpose in a fruitless branch. There is fruit, a purpose for disciples.

There has always been debate as to what Jesus means by fruit. Some say it means winning souls for Jesus. Bearing fruit will bring people to Jesus, but I'm not sure the fruit Jesus is talking is evangelism, at least not directly. The context of this conversation with Jesus and his disciples in the upper room just before Jesus leaves, is the promise that Jesus will send his Spirit to them. In that way he will remain with them even though he will soon be gone physically. I am going away, but I will remain in you through the Spirit, so you remain in me. The fruit we bear is the life Christ produces in us. It is what Paul describes as the fruit of the spirit, life characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. It is the fruit of being like Jesus. Our purpose as disciples is to live that life.

Jesus says that life is available only to those who are connected to the vine, who remain in him. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." This is unique to Christ's teaching. Other religions, philosophies teach many of the same virtues but they come to us through our mastery of the teachings of those religions and philosophies. Jesus says His life comes to us not by us mastering the teaching

but by the teacher mastering us, entering us, living out his life in us. Christ offers more than religion; he offers relationship. He is more than our teacher; he is our brother, our friend, he is Emmanuel, God with us, indwelling us. And he tells us that if we abide in him, he can and will produce his fruit in us. We can be like him.

The difference between unfruitful and fruitful discipleship is not unlike the difference between dating and marriage. A man may date a woman for many reasons: she's attractive; fun to be with; interesting to talk to; the only girl he knows that will go out with him! And he will continue to date her as long as it doesn't cost too much. But the moment dating her becomes unpleasant or un-enjoyable the relationship is usually over. Then a man meets a woman who is more than a date. She inspires in him something deeper than a desire for a good time. There's something more about her than being attractive or interesting or fun. He wants to be with no matter the cost; he's willing to commit to her forever, even if her appearance changes, even if the marriage isn't always fun or pleasant, even if tragedy comes. He commits because he wants to love her. He wants to make life changing vows to her, vows he's not even sure he can keep, but he wants to keep them. Discipleship is not merely dating Jesus. Discipleship is marrying Jesus.

When we commit like that to Jesus, he commits the same to us and his and our commitment starts changing us. It changes our will. No longer is it all about what we want; now life is about what God wants.

*If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given you.* Discipleship changes our prayers: no longer a way to talk God out of his will into ours, but a way to talk to God to learn his will; no longer a way to get to God, but a way to get to know God. When God is valuable only for what we get from him, prayer is a merely a way to get what we want from him. When God is valuable for who he is, prayer becomes a way to draw near to him. That kind of discipleship makes us people who want what God wants in the world, our hearts broken by what breaks God's heart, delighted by what delights God.

When I was at Tech my father was the graduate dean. Having a father who is graduate dean has benefits: greater access to the graduate office, introductions to vice presidents even the president. If I had a problem, I had someone who could do something about it. At times I took advantage of that. But that was not the basis of my relationship with dad. We often ate lunch together, went to games together, drive home together after classes. We discussed school concerns both student and administrator. I talked with dad about university things; it helped me understand the perspective of school administrators in contrast to that of students.

If my relationship with dad was merely a way to get what I wanted as a student, it would have cheapened our relationship. My requests would have been rejected for being foolish, selfish or simply uninformed. Because my relationship with dad was more than that, when I did ask him for help it was more likely for

things he would approve of and would be glad to help with. I think Jesus is saying the same thing about discipleship, prayer and our will. When we remain with him, when our prayers are more about conversations than acquisitions, then our requests more likely reflect his will. A fruit of discipleship is a change in our will.

A second change is expressed in the next verse. *As the Father has loved me, so have I love you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.* The word *obey* in our modern ears is a four letter word. We associate it with behavior forced on us by an authority that will punish us if we disobey. But the meaning of *obey* is not compulsory submission. It comes from the Latin *obeir*, / to *pay attention to, give ear, listen*. Disciples know who God is, they trust his word and so they know it is important to pay attention to what he says.

Suppose I am hiking in the wilderness with a guide and get hungry. I see some of these delicious looking redbane berries. I could just pick and eat them, they look really good. But I know my guide knows which berries are good and which are poison. So I will pay attention to what he says, I will *obey him*. If he tells me Native Americans used to dip their arrows in their juice to make them deadly, I'd be a fool not to listen to him, to disobey him. Now if I wasn't sure my guide cared about me, I might be uncertain what to do. If I thought my guide was mad at me or had some grudge against me, I might not trust him; why he might

actually enjoy seeing me get sick. If I don't have a trust relationship with my guide, then the hike becomes much more treacherous.

A disciple's relationship with Christ is based on love. If he tells me to do something or not to do something it is because he loves me. Jesus says, *As the Father has loved me I have loved you so remain in my love.* If I love him, if I trust him, then I will listen to him, I will obey him. If we believe God is all wise and all good and loves us, obeying him is not a burden; its a blessing. The psalmist says the commands of the Lord are right giving joy to the heart; radiant giving light to the eyes; sweeter than honey and more precious than gold. The reason is because God knows more about the wilderness than we do and by listening to him we learn how to live in this world. Not listening leads to sorrow so another fruit of discipleship, of abiding and remaining in Jesus is allowing Jesus to change our behavior for the better. That leads to the final change I want to share with you. Disciples begin to experience within them a deeper and greater joy.

Jesus says, *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.* We understand joy, by what we joy in. You can tell a lot about a person by what he joys in. Everyone has joy but not everyone's joy is full. Often joy is simply momentary "happiness", a word from the Old English word *hap* which meant luck, happenstance, dependent upon whatever "happens." Happiness is a joy that depends on circumstance, on what happens to us. Happiness is not full

joy; not the joy Jesus offers. Jesus joy, full joy, remains whatever happens, is not dependent upon luck. Jesus says if you follow me there will be times when you will not be happy. Sometimes in fact, because you follow me your circumstances will be unpleasant. But your joy need not be affected because my joy is deeper than circumstances. Jesus joy is like the stillness at the bottom of an ocean, unaffected by the surface waves; like a tree that remains firmly rooted and steady though the branches may bend in the wind and sometimes even break.

Genuine disciples discover that having all this world has to offer and not having Jesus is like losing everything. But having Jesus, even if it means losing everything else, is having it all. Jesus says, no matter what happens, you will always have me. Remain in me and I will remain in you. You may discover one day you have cancer, but if I am in you and you are in me you will not lose your joy, for it is better to remain in me and have cancer than to be cancer free without me. You may wake up and discover you have lost your wealth, but if I am in you and you are in me, you will not lose your joy; it is better to be bankrupt in me than wealthy without me.

Some hear this and say that's crazy. No way I'm a part of a religion like that. And they turn and walk away. Jesus looks to you and says, if following me means losing everything, will you walk away too? Is our joy dependent on the

surface waves of circumstance or does it reside in the deep, deep currents of the soul abiding relationship with Jesus?

Either we are remaining in him or we are not. Either our prayers are conversations that teach us God's will or frustrated laundry lists of our own will. Either we know God and pay attention to him or we do not know him, we do not trust him and so we do not hesitate to disobey him whenever our desires dictate it. Either we are happy one day and sad the next depending upon life's circumstance or we are deeply rooted in the joy of knowing that no matter what the circumstance of our life may be, we know we will never lose what is most precious, a Jesus who is more than our Lord, who is our friend. And what a friend he is! Listen to him describe his friendship. *Greater love has no one than this: that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command... I have called you friends for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*

Disciples bear fruit. You think Jesus' teaching is challenging, intimidating? You bet. So what about our lives? Have our years of following the Lord resulted in greater fruit or is our branch withering? Do we have more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness? Are we more gentle, more self controlled? Is our prayer life taking us into a richer relationship with our Lord or only something we turn to when we need something? How deep is our joy? How obedient are we? These are questions we must ask if we are serious about being disciples. Because

if our lives aren't changing, not bearing fruit, if there is no evidence of the life of the vine in the branch of our life, then eventually our faith, our life will wither and dry up.

No guilt trip, no attempt to scare you. It is simply taking Jesus' words seriously about discipleship. To be the second incarnation, Christ in the world again, indwelling our flesh and blood, is to be serious and genuine about being transformed into the image of Christ. We are not there yet. But the question is not "Are we there yet?" This is the question. "Is "there" where we want to be?" It's a fair question for Jesus to ask. We can answer like Paul, *I am not there yet, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.* This next song is based on those words. I pray it expresses our desire to increasingly take hold of the life Christ died for us to have.