

Make Disciples

Jesus' followers were to make disciples. Both the original Greek word *mathetes* and the Latin equivalent for it, from which our word disciple comes, mean "learner". Followers of Jesus are to be people that learn. In this chapter, we will consider several situations in which people learn, and apply them to Christian discipleship.

We think first of school. When I was on teaching practice, the pupils varied enormously. There was an outstanding eleven year-old, whose grasp of new subject matter was remarkable. There were other children who generally had great difficulty understanding the lesson. All had one thing in common; they made mistakes. True, there was more red ink on some exercise books, by the time I had marked them, than on others, but every piece of work which was handed in always had errors.

Jesus expected his followers to make mistakes, and they did not disappoint him! He often said that children made the best followers, and that believers were to be childlike. Indeed, on one occasion, he said that unless we became like little children, we could not enter the kingdom of heaven (Mark 10:15). Children expect to have to learn things, and are generally not surprised when they do them badly at the first attempt. Normally, children are not yet set in their ways, and are teachable. Most press on, and learn the skill in the end.

In the gospels, the disciples were slow learners. Left to themselves on one occasion, they failed to drive out an evil spirit (Mark 9:18). They could not seem to grasp that Jesus had to suffer death (Luke 18:31-34). Even after the resurrection, the question they asked showed that they were not in tune with Jesus' way of thinking (Acts 1:6-7). We can be encouraged by their slowness; they went on to do well, and so can we.

My mother used to say that some of her friends at school who appeared brilliant at the time did not shine in later life, while others whom she barely noticed at school came to the fore later. There is an important truth here; it is not always those with the most ability who do well, but those who persevere. Jesus said as much; "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully taught will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40)".

In the classroom, we observe that while some are good learners, others are virtually unteachable, simply because they ignore what the teacher says. I was once a member of a tutor group of two, where the other student argued against every single point the learned professor tried to explain! His patience was wonderful to see. I hope I wasn't so trying.

How easily we think we know better. When I was new in parish work, I once had two visits to do on a particular afternoon, after which I needed to wash my hair. As I was about to set out, the thought came to me to wash my hair first. "No, Lord", I thought, "I can't go visiting with wet hair." (I had forgotten that we had a hair dryer). The impression that I should wash my hair first persisted, but I overruled it, thinking that the idea could not be from God. I walked off to the first house - the man was out. I went to the second house two doors away - the lady was out. Maddening! By this time I had the strong feeling that I had messed up the afternoon by my obstinacy, as I walked back home.

As I neared our front door, the lady swept past in her car with a cheerful wave. I felt a complete fool. If I had washed my hair first, she at least would have been at home by the time I would have arrived. By the time I had finished there, I thought to myself, the man would probably have been home too. The lesson for me was one often heard in classrooms; do as you're told. It is a basic one in the Christian life.

Some Christian leaders say that God does not speak in this kind of way today, and that we should not attempt to hear his voice. I believe this teaching may have arisen from a desire to protect the written word of God from additions. The Bible ends with a warning that nobody should add to the book, or take away from it (Rev 22:18-19). This may only apply to the book of Revelation, but personally, I prefer to take it as applying to all sixty-six books of the Bible. In the last chapter, we saw that we have no authority to detract from God's word. We have no authority to add to it either. However, washing hair first before visiting rather than the other way around, on the basis of hearing from God, can hardly be said to be a threat to the integrity of Scripture. No addition to

God's written word is implied. The difficulty with the idea of God not speaking today is that it introduces frustration. All the men and women in the Bible who heard God's voice and acted on it become people that we can admire, but not copy. Elijah, for example, was fed by ravens according to God's promise to him (1 Kgs 18:3-6), and shared a handful of meal with a widow for many days without its running out, following another promise (v14-16). Similar experiences of receiving God's provision by faith in his word to us may prove important for believers in hard times to come. I believe that receiving insights of this kind from God did not cease with the closing of the canon of Scripture.

The conviction of this book is that God does speak today, but never in a way which compromises Scripture. Christians need to learn to distinguish the promptings of God from their own imagination, or from any other source. In this respect, followers of Jesus are in a classroom situation; many mistakes will be made in attempting to learn God's ways and sense what he is up to day by day.

Believers need to know their Bible well in order to have a feel for the kind of things that God might and might not say. They will make mistakes, but that should not stop them. If they don't start, for fear of making mistakes, they will never learn. Believers should be childlike, and expect to hear from the heavenly father.

I believe this principle of learning through mistakes applies to every command Jesus gave. The first 25 people I laid hands on, in an attempt to heal them, showed no improvement whatever, to my knowledge, but gradually, from about the 26th one onwards, I began to see some improvement in most people. As the evangelist Bill Subritzky says, "God rewards persistence".

Constant repetition is a key part of learning. A boy at the school I went to became a professional violinist after he left. This would not have been possible without many hours of practice. I well remember him as a thirteen year-old practising a group of four notes over and over again, without any variation, for up to forty minutes on end. He would do this exercise regularly. His thoroughness paid dividends. The point for believers is obvious.

As well as learning, there are three instructions given to disciples in the gospels which help explain the nature of being a disciple. These are 'abide', 'believe' and 'follow'. We will take them in turn.

When Jesus called the twelve, their first priority was "to be with him" (Mark 3:14). Before they learned to do anything, they were to be with Jesus. We will devote a chapter to 'abiding' later on. Staying in Jesus' company meant going at his pace. This principle can be seen in the practice of using two animals yoked together to draw a plough. Jesus applied this to following him; "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me (Matt 11:29)."

In the ancient world, it was considered good practice to place a young animal alongside an older one. After a period of having a bruised neck, from the wooden yoke bumping about, the youngster would learn to go at the pace and style of the older one. Once it was well-trained, it would be ready to use to train another animal.

Disciples today are to be "with him" as their first priority. Any and every action which disciples may end up doing should flow from this relationship. Unlike newly-trained animals, who may graduate away from their trainer, believers stay yoked to Jesus, for they are to remain in his presence for ever. As we shall see in Part six, he once told his followers to be united with him like branches in a vine (John 15:4). If they did not, they would stop bearing fruit (v5 & 8).

It is sometimes tempting to substitute busy activity for being with Jesus. It is an important lesson to learn to be in his company, because without it, Christians wither and die (v6). A Christian's relationship with Jesus should match the relationship Jesus had with his Father in the gospels (v9).

Moving on, disciples were told to believe. The word 'believe' in English is somewhat imprecise; it can mean anything from 'guess' or 'think' to 'know'. The gospel sense of the term can be explained by use of the sentence, "I believe in my doctor". This statement makes a specific point. The person who says it means that whenever he is ill, because he has confidence in his doctor, his first thought is to go to the surgery, and he makes a point of doing what the doctor

says.

It could not be said of a relative of mine that she believed in the doctor. She went to him, and was under his care, but failed to act on his instructions, to the extent that on one occasion he said to her, "If you persist in going on this outing to the theatre that you have in mind, then I will take no responsibility for the outcome." She chose to go despite his warning. In the event, she came to no harm.

Even though she attended the surgery and took some, or even all of the pills and potions, there is no way that my relative could be described as a believer in her doctor. So with Christians; belief in Jesus means one hundred per cent commitment to the whole package, not a pick and choose approach.

Belief includes trust. Sometimes, it is not easy to trust. In the face of death, for example, it requires a decision of the will to accept Jesus' words "Trust in God, trust also in me. In my father's house there are many rooms (John 14:1-2)." Christians cannot see the reality; all they can do is choose to trust.

This was the experience of the men of faith in the Old Testament. They often died without seeing what they believed in come to pass (Heb 11 complete, esp v13). Faith grows through being tested and tried, a process seen as discipline, which is another ingredient of learning, and an important part of being a son (Heb 12:5-12, Ja 1:2-3, 1 Pet 1:6-7). True faith triumphs in the face of difficulties, and is seen to be closely allied to perseverance (Heb 12:1-3).

This leads us to the word 'follow'. When Jesus called his disciples, the phrase he used was, "Follow me" (Matt 4:19, 9:9, John 1:43). After his failure during Jesus' trial, Peter was once again told to follow Jesus (John 21:19 & 22). In his first letter, he explains that disciples are to follow in Jesus steps, with special reference to sharing his sufferings (1 Peter 2:22). We need to face the fact that to follow Jesus means what it says; we identify with every part of him, not just the easy parts. We cannot afford to have the attitude my relative had to the doctor. Rather, Christians need to have the attitude of Jesus' mother, who said "Do whatever he tells you," whether the instruction is something exciting like turning water into wine, or painful, like taking up a cross (John 2:5, Luke 14:27).

We have seen that to believe is to receive Jesus complete (John 1:12). Jesus once said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him (John 7:37-38)." This shows us that disciples can help other people to the extent that they themselves are united with Jesus. They make mistakes, but have set themselves to learn from Jesus the secrets of the kingdom of heaven through being in his company (Mark 4:10-11a). This attitude is the heart of being a disciple.