

SECRET DISCIPLESHIP: JOHN 19:38-42

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Even the lives of the relatively minor characters in the Bible have a message for us if we look closely enough. Let's look at Joseph of Arimathea to see what kind of a person he is and what we can learn from him. First of all, his hometown of Arimathea was a city of the Jews. Joseph was a member of the Council and a respected citizen and leader. Luke 23:50 identifies him as "a good and just man". Evidently Brother Joseph was relatively wealthy and a prudent pre-planner in that he possessed enough finances and foresight to purchase a tomb during his lifetime in anticipation of his deathtime.

Joseph possessed a great many of the characteristics desirable from the world's point of view. However, from God's point of view, he was nothing more than a "secret disciple". Perhaps some of you students possess many of the characteristics which are desirable from a campus perspective. Maybe you were baptized as an infant, grew up in the church and a Christian family, participate in BSU mission trips, serve on the Executive Council, and even give glowing testimonies on Thursday nights at the BSU. But if you are not standing up for Jesus Christ in your dorm, in the classroom, at the gym, and in the cafeteria, then you are nothing more than a "secret disciple".

Remember those elementary school days? It was easy to talk tough on your own turf. But the tone was tempered depending on one's relative proximity to home or big brother. Similarly, Christians tend to "talk tough" on their own church or BSU turf. But where our talk is really tested and our actions analyzed is outside the environs of

traditional Christendom where the "hallelujahs" and "praise the Lord's" are not so popular or accepted.

In considering this passage of scripture there are four aspects of Secret Discipleship we wish to consider: the characteristics, the causes, the consequences, and the cure.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SECRET DISCIPLESHIP

Secret Discipleship often manifests itself through an uncomfortable unwillingness to identify oneself publicly with Christ as was the case with Joseph. However, there is a fundamental paradox which exists in the very term "secret disciple". For a genuine disciple of any persuasion is one who constantly communicates a life of consistency, conformity, and commitment to the central cause at hand. In other words, one should not have to guess which side a true disciple is on.

There is just a contagious fervor attached to affiliation with any group in which a strong sense of devotion exists. Many examples of this exist on the college campus. Take, for example, a fraternity or sorority. Many of the devotees to these groups can almost exceed, excess and surpass monotony as they proudly recite and display their respective colors, letters, phrases and chants. Obviously they take great pleasure and derive significant satisfaction from letting the whole campus know where their true loyalties lie.

Similarly, college students and others spend a great deal of money in the purchase of sports-related vestments and other paraphernalia in order to identify which side they support whether on the street or at a game. Great! Everybody loves a winning team. But sports teams will come and go throughout history and very few people will ever remember the final scores. What we need to remember is that we as Christians have the privilege and opportunity to be a part of a tremendous team whose record of wins spans throughout history from generation to generation. This team has a position for everyone to

play so that no one need “ride the bench”. This team has a coach who takes a personal and intimate interest in each player. This team is God’s team! Who wouldn’t be proud to claim a team like that?

THE CAUSES OF SECRET DISCIPLESHIP

According to verse 38 of our text, the cause of Secret Discipleship in Joseph’s particular case involved his fear of the Jews. Due to his social status Joseph undoubtedly experienced a considerable amount of peer pressure. Peer pressure has been at the root of many a Christian college student’s slide from a vital and vibrant witness, to an ineffective apologetic — for lack of a better term — “spiritual wimp”. We must all realize that life is really not worth living until we have each found something worth dying for. We must learn to stand for something or we will surely fall for anything. As II Timothy 1:7 admonishes us: “God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

What are some of the other possible causes of this phenomenon of Secret Discipleship? Three possibilities are lack of knowledge, lack of experience, and simply being ashamed.

1. Lack of Knowledge — One naturally does not talk much about something one does not know much about. Unfortunately the average Christian has a problem with “Biblical Illiteracy”. We somehow think that the Word of God will somehow penetrate our hearts and minds through a process of proximity or osmosis. As Hosea 4:6 notes, “The people perish for a lack of knowledge.” In order to correct this spiritual malady we must seek the mind of Christ through digesting a daily dose of divine direction obtainable from Dr. Timothy who tells us to “Study to show yourself approved unto God a workman who needeth

not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (II Timothy 2:15)

2. Lack of Experience — Another cause of Secret Discipleship is a lack of experience. Let me see the hands of those of you who know (here insert the name of a well-known Contemporary Christian music artist or Pop/Rock/TV star). Let me see your hands. O.K., how many of you received a letter from him/her this week? What about a phone call? How many of you have had him/her over for dinner lately? We can see through this illustration that we may know a lot *about* this person, but we don't really *know* him/her. To really know him/her would require much time, effort, and communication. Similarly, a lot of people know much *about* Jesus Christ, but have never really met him personally. Many of our churches and BSU's contain those who have spent their entire lives living in a third party relationship with Jesus. Again Dr. Timothy comes to our aid as he affirms, "I *know* in whom I have believed and am persuaded..." (II Timothy 1:12)
3. Simply Ashamed — Sometimes our lack of desire for freely and joyfully exposing our spiritual identity simply has to do with us being ashamed of our faith. We may feel that others will view us as naïve, fanatical, or less than socially astute if we "overdo" our emphasis on our personal relationship with Christ.

Parenthetically, a "fanatic" is usually defined as "anyone who is more spiritually involved or dedicated than I am." It is true that we tend to view our own level of spirituality as the "norm". Anything more or less, over or under our level is subconsciously deemed too much or too little. What we must realize, though, is that other people are not our barometer for

spiritual standing and progress; God is. Through knowing this we can see that every time we compare ourselves with Christ, we realize what a long way we have to go; we must claim the declaration as stated in Romans 1:16. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation to all those that believe...."

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SECRET DISCIPLESHIP

In verses 39-40 of our text we see that because he was a secret disciple, the only significant contribution Joseph ended up making was to bury Jesus. Likewise when we fail to let our light shine in the everyday situations of life, we also end up in effect "burying" Jesus. Each time we forfeit an opportunity to witness with our roommate or classmate, we are essentially burying Jesus. Each time we intentionally disguise our effort to give thank to God for our meal in the cafeteria, we are essentially burying Jesus. Each time we fail to respond during a class discussion which denies the existence of God, we are essentially burying Jesus.

Matthew 5 identifies us as the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world". Salt is no good without taste and light is useless as long as it is covered up. We need to get out of the proverbial saltshaker and stop simply flicking our lights in each other's faces. Salt is for useful seasoning and light is for dispelling darkness. Don't cheat yourself out of a blessing through failing to consistently share your personal version of the greatest story ever told.

THE CURE FOR SECRET DISCIPLESHIP

Psalms 51:10-12 gives us a clue for being cured of Secret Discipleship. It says: "Create within me a clean heart, Oh God, and renew the right spirit. Restore unto me with thy free spirit." If we would just take the time to take ourselves back to our initial salvation experience and relive

the joy, power, and excitement that once existed prior to being sapped by sarcasm and cynicism. If we would just take the time to ask God to release us from the restraining fetters of traditionalism and social expectations in order to catch a glimpse of what God can accomplish through a life of complete worshipful praise and practice obedience to Him. "Eye has not seen nor ear heard what God hath prepared for those who love Him." (I Cor. 2:9).

It is intriguing to observe how Jesus often utilized a psychological approach as he healed people and then told them not to tell anyone. I can imagine that after he healed the paralytic who had been lame since birth, the man was probably so excited as he confidently strode down the road for the very first time unaided by sympathetic friends. I imagine that he would see an old school mate and with enthusiasm almost bursting at the seams he would say, "Hey, let me tell you what Je..." Then he would stop short, snap his fingers, and say to himself, "That's right, Jesus told me not to tell anybody." He would probably walk a little farther, see an acquaintance who used to sit at the gate and beg along with him, and without thinking say, "Hey, John, just wait 'till you hear what Jes..." Again, he would stop short and keep on walking in an attempt to obey his healer's instructions. But I imagine as he reached his home, burst through the doors and looked at his family as they stared back at him in amazement that this, their loved one, who they had never seen stand without assistance, was now standing strong and walking tall! By this time the pressure would have simply been too great for the man and he would have to say, in the words of that old gospel song, "I said I wasn't gonna tell anybody but I just couldn't keep it to myself what the Lord has done for me!!"

Oh, my brothers and sisters, if we could just take a lesson from the paralytic and come out of our spiritual closets to let our personal worlds know that we serve a mighty God who is "able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we can ask or think." (Eph 3:20)