

Jesus' Call to Discipleship

By David E. Garland

Someone has said rather cynically that the typical ambition of an American student when he or she graduates is to land a nice job with a nice income, to marry a nice person, to live in a nice home in a nice neighborhood, to have two nice children, to join a nice club and perhaps to go to a nice church which will make minimal demands on time and pocket-book. The desire is for everything in life to be nice. If this is correct, then few will be interested in Jesus' call to discipleship—at least as it is presented in the New Testament. It is simply too radical a demand. Jesus' call to absolute commitment to him and to the reign of God may seem too arduous; his call to a higher righteousness, too impractical; and his call to make disciples of the nations, too visionary. But in his call to discipleship Jesus did not appeal to the lowest common denominator.

A Call to Commitment

For Jesus, discipleship was not one commitment among many others; it was **the** commitment. He called folks to repentance in the expectation that they would change their hearts and minds about what was ultimate in life and change their lives accordingly. He expected no less than an unconditional surrender to God. Any human tie or affection which stood in the way of a decision for the kingdom of God had to be broken. Neutrality was impossible; half-measures, worse than no response at all.

Jesus came to people in the midst of everyday life with his challenge, "Follow me." He called them when they least expected it and had made no special preparations for it. To answer his call, Simon and Andrew had to leave their nets (Mk. 1:16-18). James and John had to leave their father and the thriving fish business (Mk. 1:19-20). Levi had to abandon the tax office (Mk. 2:13-14). No questions were raised about hospitalization plans, retirement programs, or career opportunities, let alone salaries. There were none. These disciples committed themselves to something beyond this world which Jesus said was already breaking into this world and could not be seen except with the eyes of the heart. There was something

more to life, he claimed, than catching a string of fish. He called these disciples to seek first the kingdom; and they left everything to follow this humble, obscure, unauthorized preacher who claimed to be the representative of that kingdom. Later disciples would do the same. Paul abandoned his heritage and career in Judaism in which he so excelled to gain "the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus as his Lord" (Phil. 3:4-9; Gal. 1:14).

The early disciples whose calls are recorded in the Gospels were exceptions among the followers of Jesus. Jesus said that he was the way to life (Jn. 14:6), but to enter that way one must pass through a narrow gate where the road is marked by hardship. Few chose to enter (Mt. 7:13-14). He was not surprised when "the many" sauntered off down wider, more congenial thoroughfares where the signs promised, "Fantasy Island." The truth is: "Most cling to this world and do not muster enough energy to decide wholly for God."¹ Deciding wholly for God was what was required. Following Jesus meant following him down the road where the signs say "To Golgotha." It possibly meant breaking family ties, renouncing ambitions, abandoning material security, with the prospects of a cross with your name on it waiting at the end of the road (Lk. 14:25-27).

Jesus was therefore cautious in accepting would-be disciples (Jn. 2:23-25). He encouraged them to count the cost before taking the plunge. With this in mind, he once told two parables, one about a tower builder and another about a king pondering a campaign of war (Lk. 14:28-32). Jesus noted that in mundane affairs, such as tower building, people do not embark on projects without first taking stock of their ability to carry things through to the end. A thing halfdone, it is assumed, is worse than a thing never begun. Should a person commit to building he/she will spend all that is necessary to finish the building if only to avoid being left with some albatross that stands as a monument to failure. Neither will any sensible king plunge into war outnumbered two to one unless he has some assurance that he can win. But if he commits himself to war, he will fling every last man and chariot into the battle. Jesus did not design to scare off the timid with these parables so much as to enlist those who were willing to stake *all* on something they had first considered in cold blood.² He

was not looking for a short burst of enthusiasm that would carry one through a hundred yard dash and then fizzle out but a lifelong commitment that would carry through to the end.

Eagerness was fine, but it was not virtue in itself. To one who said, "I will follow you wherever you go," Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (Lk. 9:57-58). He was simply informing the man that if he cast in his lot with him he was casting in his lot with the dispossessed rather than the power brokers. Even the supreme duty to parents could not precede commitment to Jesus—"Leave the dead to bury the dead" (Lk. 9:59-62; cf. 1 Kgs. 19:19-21). For many the cost was too great and they turned away (Jn. 6:60-67).

The cost of discipleship, however, may be looked at in two ways. It may cost everything, but it is worth everything. And one must also look at the cost of not becoming a disciple. The parables in Matthew 13:44-46 describe what the disciples of the kingdom are like when they encounter God. They sell all and buy (13:44, 46). The field hand who finds a treasure can never enjoy that treasure without first becoming a landowner. The merchant can never possess the pearl of great price without first selling out his entire stock. They do not get something for nothing, but something for everything. But what was once perceived as of supreme value has become of negligible worth in comparison to the new reality. The disciples seized the hour, committed themselves boldly; others, like the rich ruler, let it slip through their fingers, committed only to themselves. When so many others turned aside, it laid bare the decision of the twelve to follow.

A Call to a Higher Righteousness

Jesus told his disciples, "Unless your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees you will in no way enter the kingdom of Heaven" (Mt. 9:20), and the righteousness of the Pharisees was proverbial (cf. Phil. 3:6). The warp and woof of the Sermon on the Mount is "What more are you doing than others?" (Mt. 5:47) and "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt. 5:48). This means that the true nature of discipleship cannot be discerned from the lifestyle of the average church member. The disciple can never judge himself or herself on the basis of what others are doing

but only on the basis of the commands of Christ. And Christ's commands direct us to a higher righteousness.

Jesus calls us to complete self denial: "If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mk. 8:34). The cross, however, has become sanitized. It is perched comfortably in the altars of stained glass sanctuaries. It adorns worshippers as they sit reverently on their padded pew cushions. As one preacher said, "It is more often worn than borne." But in the first century it was an instrument of death. When Jesus called followers to bear their crosses, he was calling them to put to death their self-centered ambitions. He was informing them that the cross was necessary not only as a means of redemption but as a way of life. Not unlike us, the first disciples delighted in displays of power and glorious achievements, jockeyed for position among themselves, and wanted a Messiah who would offer them their hearts' desires. They never seemed to comprehend the meaning of the cross as a way of life during Jesus' lifetime (cf. Mk. 8:31-38; 9:30-37; 10:32-45). All too often they were like Peter who thought the things of men (Mk. 8:33): pampering oneself rather than denying oneself, saving one's life rather than giving it for others. They preferred the wisdom of the world which says, "Seek your own advantage no matter how much it hurts others," over the wisdom of the cross which bids, "Serve others no matter how much it hurts you." Eventually they learned (after all, the Greek term for disciple derives from the verb "to learn"). They learned the truth: "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (Jn. 12:25, cf. 1 Pet. 4:12-16). They also learned that the disciple is more than one who is simply looking for the kingdom (Mk. 15:43) or who merely applauds the teaching and mighty works of Jesus (Mk. 7:37). Discipleship entails more than hailing Jesus as Messiah (Mk. 8:29) or even crying, "Lord, Lord" (Mt. 7:21; cf. 25:11, 44). The disciple is one who stakes everything on the cross as a way of life. As George Beasley-Murray wrote: The outstretched hand of God over his people does not prevent them from enduring the cost of bearing witness to Christ before a rebellious generation. On the contrary, they must learn the weight of the cross before they taste the power of the resurrection.³

By word and example Jesus also drilled into his disciples' heads that they were called to be servants not bureaucrats for the kingdom. They were not to scramble up the ladder of religious success; they were not to lord it over others (Mk. 10:42-43); they were not to insist on ecclesiastical titles (Mt. 23:8-10). The greatest of them would be the one who became the servant of all (cf. Jn. 13:12-17). The one who exalted himself would be humbled, and the one who humbled himself would be exalted (Mt. 23:11-12).

Jesus also demanded that if they did not renounce (literally "take leave of," "say farewell to") all that they have, they could not be his disciples (Lk. 14:33). Again many turned away, but Jesus insisted on singleminded devotion and warned that one cannot serve God and Mammon (Lk. 16:13). It is impossible to be devoted to the things of this world and be ruled by God (Lk. 16:14-15). The danger of mammon is that it increases the love of acquisition, the desire to build bigger barns (Lk. 12:18). It whets the appetite for self-gratification as in the case of the rich man who wore imported linen and the purple of kings and feasted sumptuously every day (Lk. 16:19). It stunts the instinct for self-sacrifice as in the case of the rich ruler who would rather retain his wealth than give it to the poor (Lk. 18:22).⁴ It also promotes the search for security in this world; and so the rich "fool" says to himself, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry" (Lk. 12:19). He was well prepared for this life, but totally unprepared for the life to come where mammon has no clout.

The disciple is a pilgrim exile in this world (1 Pet. 1:17) who cannot be tied down to the things of this world. The danger is that the disciple might be tempted to "go native," to make Babylon home, to become acclimated, accommodating and acquiescent to the standards of this world. But Jesus calls to nonconformity and a life free from the anxieties that mark the pagan, frenzied search for the things of this world (Mt. 6:25-34).

The disciple is also to be transformed in all of his or her inner attitudes. Piety is not something to be shown off to win applause or the good opinion of others but is to stem from real communion with God. If one is prone to religiosity, Jesus said, go into a closet (Mt. 6:1-18). The way one handles one's

anger, sexuality, and attitude toward enemies is to be totally transformed (Mt. 5:21-30, 38-48). Disciples are also to be known by their love toward all others. Eduard Schweizer proclaimed, "When Jesus becomes Lord over a human heart, fellow men are always close at hand and find open doors."⁵ They also should find open hearts (cf. Mt. 25:31-46). When Jesus confronted the religious leaders of Israel who objected to his style of ministry, he told them to go and learn Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy not sacrifice" (Mt. 9:13). They never did (Mt. 12:7). They majored in minors and minored in majors—justice, mercy, faith (Mt. 23:23). Theirs was a religion so turned in on itself that it turned away others who were less successful religiously, socially, and economically.

The disciple of Christ, in contrast, is to imitate God (Eph. 4:32-51; Col. 3:13) by forgiving others as he or she has been forgiven by God (Mt. 6:12, 14-15; 18:21-35). In fact the disciple is even asked to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

A Call to Make Disciples

According to Luke, Jesus called Simon and his fellow fishermen when they were finishing up from a night's worth of futile labor (Lk. 5:1-11). They were washing their nets and getting ready to go home to bed when Jesus, an amateur fisherman at best, tells them to go back out. To a trained fisherman it seemed foolish—fishing in deep water was not likely to produce much of a catch during mid-day. They were weary, dispirited, and not a little dubious; nevertheless, they obeyed. The reward of their obedience, a great haul of fish, was more than they could handle.

This was a symbol of an even more successful mission as fishers of men. That is what they were to become. In Luke 5:10, Jesus says, "You will be catching men" (*RSV*). It literally reads in Greek, "You will be catching men **alive**." In contrast to fishing in order to kill and eat, they will "fish" to impart life to people.

Disciples are called to mission. When Jesus lamented that the field was ripe for harvest but the laborers were few, he asked his disciples to pray for laborers (Mt. 9:36-38). Presumably they all prayed and the next thing they knew they were being sent out into the harvest (Mt. 10:1-5). Bible

studies and Christian growth seminars are fine but meaningless unless they translate into active mission.

The final charge Jesus gave to his disciples instructed them to go into the world to make disciples (Mt. 28:19-20). They were to baptize, which is the gateway to a new destiny in Christ. They were to teach **all** things that Christ had commanded—including the “uncomfortable” sayings—and they were to teach that these commands were to be obeyed (cf. Mt. 5:19). They were also assured that discipleship is not a solitary venture carried on by dint of their own power. Christ would be with them even to the end of the age. Through faith and patience they would inherit the promises (Heb. 6:12).

Footnotes

1. Rudolf Bultmann, **Jesus and the Word**, trans. by L. P. Smith and E. H. Lantero (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 32.
2. T. W. Manson, **The Sayings of Jesus** (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1949), p. 281.
3. George R. Beasley-Murray, **The Book of Revelation**, New Century Bible (London: Oliphants, 1974), p. 181.
4. James Moffatt, “Mammon,” **A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels**, ed. by James Hastings et. al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1933 [repr.]), II:507.
5. Eduard Schweizer, **God's Inescapable Nearness**, trans. by James Cox (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1971), p. 74.