

PRINCIPLES OF DISCIPLESHIP

"If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (Jno 8:31)

In the age in which we sojourn, there is much talk amongst those who profess to be Christ's brethren about discipleship, as if it is somehow distinct from doctrine. The thing that matters, we are told not infrequently, is not that we understand the intricacies of Scripture, rather that we are able to apply the ways of Christ in our daily lives. "Head knowledge" is seen as being less important than practical living; the term "academic understanding" being used instead of "spiritual discernment," to bolster the notion that diligent searching of the Scriptures is some kind of optional extra for the more educated amongst us. And accordingly therefore, there is a strong emphasis in some quarters, away from the exposition of the Word, towards the principles of 'good living,' or a "Christian way of life." A "simple faith" and clean living is all that is said to be required; and this concept is widely taught as being the very essence of Discipleship – and not just by the Churches around us.

There is, of course, much truth in the above proposition, but as is so often the case, there is also untruth. It is quite true that to implement the commandments of Christ in daily living is essential - it is a vital aspect of the believer's walk that they follow the ways of their Master - and the purpose of this series is to demonstrate that fact, by examining the lives of the Twelve pre-eminent disciples of the Master in later articles. Christ himself taught: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you" (Jno 15:14). None are confessed to be the Friends of Messiah therefore, save those who do those things commanded by him. A Christ-like manner of life is an integral part of discipleship, and an aspect that ought never be neglected under the erroneous supposition that belief alone will save (cp Jas 2:14-26).

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING

But notwithstanding all this, it is quite incorrect to speak of Christ-like living, as being distinct from Scriptural discernment in the disciples' life. There is, in fact, a logical flaw in elevating the practical outworking of the principles of The Word to a status which is above an understanding of it. How can a man do those things commanded by Messiah, unless he knows what those things are? And how can he know what they are, unless he diligently applies himself to a study of the Master's life and sayings? Surely, he cannot. Simple logic alone demonstrates the fact; an understanding of The Word of the Most High - which underpins all that Christ taught - is essential to know what the Master would have us do; and therefore also to do it.

Indeed, the importance of sound doctrine in discipleship is spoken of by Christ himself, in defining the qualities required of men to be his disciples: "if ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (Jno 8:31). Again, nothing could be plainer; in order to be liberated by the Truth, a person must know, and understand what that Truth

actually is. And in order to continue in Christ's Word, a person must be familiar with the Words Christ spake. Far from being distinct from discipleship, soundness in the Word of Truth is a vital prerequisite to it - if none are recognised as either Christ's Friends, or his disciples who do not his Words, surely those who desire the friendship of Messiah will endeavour to learn those words, and know them in order that they can do them? Yet, all too often we find personal study of the Scriptures being neglected; life is too busy - and "as long as I live the life of the Truth, I don't need 'head-knowledge'" we have been told on oh, so many occasions. But those who reason like this fail to recognise that without the knowledge of the Father's Word in our heads (for where else could we have it?), it is just not possible to "continue" in that Word, and be so regarded as a disciple.

A TEST OF DISCIPLESHIP

It is to the disciples only that the Word of Truth is committed, as saith the spirit of Christ in Isaiah: "Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples" (Is 8:16). The Master himself confirmed this; when "the disciples came and said unto him, Why speakest Thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given" (Mat 13:11). The matter is thus confirmed and settled. The Disciples of Christ are not those who, in their simplicity, have no knowledge of the hidden things of the Word - on the contrary, they are those to whom the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven are given; they are those in whom the testimony and law of Christ are sealed. Those to whom those things are "not given" are that class of men who refuse Christ's ways, and are not His disciples. Thus, any who claim to be disciples can in this manner be put to the test - does what they believe concur with the teachings of Christ concerning the revealed mysteries of the Kingdom? Does what they teach concur with the Law and the Testimony? If so, and they manifestly walk in the light of the Truth, they may be accepted as disciples, according to the conditions of Scripture. But if their teachings be found wanting, they are exposed as being mere pretenders in whom there is no light (Is 8:20), "clouds without water, carried about of winds, trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; and wandering stars to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever" (Jude 13). Choosing the darkness of ignorance, rather than the light of revealed wisdom, the "the blackness of darkness" in sheol is their appointed portion. These are no disciples, and when they manifest themselves, they must be excluded from the circle of those who are, lest being "sunken rocks in your feasts of charity", they cause others to make shipwreck of their faith, as did Hymenaeus and Alexander, concerning whom Paul spake elsewhere (1Tim 1:19,20).

SIMPLICITY OR WISDOM?

There is a marked contrast between the teaching of the Spirit concerning the need for knowledge, wisdom and discernment, and the advocates of a 'simple faith' who would have us believe that to search the Scriptures is some kind of optional extra for the academically inclined. Consider the following testimonies:

“Doth not Wisdom cry? And Understanding put forth her voice? ... she crieth at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in of the doors. Unto you, O men I call; and my voice is to the sons of man. O ye simple, understand wisdom: And, ye fools, be ye of an understanding heart” (Prov 8:1-5).

“How much better is it to get wisdom than gold! And to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver!” (Prov 16:16).

“He that getteth wisdom loveth his own soul; He that keepeth understanding shall find good” (Prov 19:8)

“Buy the Truth, and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding” (Prov 23:23)

And conversely, for those who do not delight in seeking to understand the ways of the Most High, preferring to leave such things to the ‘higher educated’, there is this warning:

“the man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain in the congregation of the dead” (Prov 21:16)

“A fool does not delight in understanding, but in uncovering his own heart” (Prov 18:2 T/S)

So it is, that those who, rather than delighting in the revealed wisdom of Yahweh, prefer to “discover their inner selves,” by searching and exposing their own hearts, or having that done for them by professionals whose specialise in such things; those who advocate this type of new age philosophy, are pronounced “fools” by the Eternal Spirit. The Scriptures alone are able to give necessary enlightenment for deliverance, for the Apostle declares that they are “able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2Tim 3:15), and those who neglect them will not therefore obtain that wisdom, or that salvation. Not studying the spirit-word, they will not shew themselves approved unto God (2Tim 2:15), and will prove to be workmen who do need to be ashamed, for not having done the work required. Only by firstly obtaining understanding can a man walk within the way thereof; all others will quickly wander out of that way, and shall remain amongst the congregation of the dead. This is the Spirit’s testimony, which we would do well to take heed.

FOLLOWING CHRIST

For those who humble themselves to receive the testimony of Christ with child-like meekness, yet who seek to grow in understanding as men (1Cor 14:20), there is a requirement to walk according unto it, to “continue” in his word. If they would truly be disciples, there is a requirement to follow their Master in all his ways: “for even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps” (1 Pet 2:21); even as the Master himself said: “if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross,

and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Mat 16:24).

The spirit of discipleship then, is the spirit of self-denial, and self-sacrifice, rather than self-pleasure. "Whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" in the latter days of resurrectional glory, is the great and exceeding precious promise given to those with ears to hear; and certainly those words would have been of great comfort and consolation to our brethren of former ages who literally did lose their lives for their adherence to the Testimony of Christ.

But there is also another sense in which a life is lost when a disciple desires to follow his Lord. In taking up his cross, the believer must follow Christ into the grave, for that is where the Master went with his burden – the place of death and sacrifice. And this is accomplished through Baptism – an identification with the death of Christ:

"how shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptised into Jesus Christ were baptised into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death ... knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is free from sin. Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him; knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 6:2-11).

The obedient disciple then, is dead with Christ. He has resolved to crucify with him, the "old man", the fleshly manner of life, and disposition of thought - and so the life of the 'old man' becomes lost to us. We have lost that former existence, wherein we pleased ourselves rather than he who laid down his life for us; when we gave ourselves over to the satisfaction of our own desires. Thus, we have willingly lost our own lives for Christ's sake, for having been redeemed by his shed blood, we are now not our own, for we have been bought with a price, and therefore must glorify the Father in our body Spirit, which are His (1Cor 6:19).

"we thus judge, that if one died for all, then are all dead: and that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again" (2Cor 5:14).

Having lost their lives, in willingly laying them down them in the aqueous grave, the believer is as one who is alive from the dead; having risen up from the Baptismal waters. Their lives are not their own; they belong to another, and must walk through the time they have remaining bearing the cross of Christ, that is, bearing reproach and suffering for His Sake.

However, there are those who, having taken on the yoke of discipleship to Christ, have failed to plough a straight course, and have turned either to the right hand side, or to the left, through being distracted by the things of the world. Indeed, they seek to remove that yoke from off them, desiring to regain their lives once again. But, as their Master has decreed, those not willing to lose their lives, but seeking rather to save them shall, at the last, lose them. They may well rescue the Old Man out of his watery grave, and resurrect him to a temporary existence once again - but his end is to perish in the pit for evermore. Far better it is to willingly lose him now by voluntarily crucifying him with Christ, that we might gain all things in the world to come, than to lose all things at the last.

BUILDING AND WARFARE

In his discourse on Discipleship, the Master describes the life of a disciple as one of both building, but also contending in battle:

“Whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after Me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after that he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, ‘this man began to build, and was not able to finish’. Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassador, and desireth conditions of peace. So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:31-33).

There is a requirement then, to both count the cost, and consider the perils of discipleship before taking up the cross. The Disciple’s role is twofold – to build up, and to wage a warfare, and such an one therefore must consider whether or not he has sufficient resources to commence building, or sufficient courage to go to battle. Not that he is in a position to decide that because he doesn’t have the resources that he will not build, or that because he is fearful, he will not engage in the battle – both are necessary for his survival. He must needs build a tower, for a place of safety, refuge, and to provide a vantage point to watch for coming danger - if the tower is not built, he will have no place of safety to flee to. Also, he is under threat from a hostile power—shall he go to battle, or not? The choice he has, is to either yield in shameful surrender; and suffer the consequences, or to stand and fight for his life. He must determine therefore whether he is able to contend against the adversary with so few resources – and if not, obtain more before it is too late, because for the believer who desires to follow Christ, surrender to King Sin is no option: “Let not sin reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof ... know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?” (Rom 6:13, 16). To rebel against Sin is then, a matter of survival; those who serve sin will reap only death as their wages (Rom 6:23). The believer must carefully consider the options before him, in order to ensure the success of his warfare.

But what is required in order to obtain the victory? In human terms, the odds are high against, for the enemy is twofold greater, "whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand". In human terms, the situation does not look at all promising - but to the eye of faith, the victory is assured. Remember Gideon, the outstanding man of faith who came against many with few - and deliberately so for a reason: "Yahweh said unto Gideon, "The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, "Mine own hand hath saved me" (Jud 7:2), and so the number was reduced to a mere 300 to contend against the mighty host of the Midianites.

The manner by which the victory was obtained is most instructive to those who desire to war against the power of sin - it was by causing light to shine in the darkness:

"So Gideon, and the hundred men that were with him, came unto the outside of the camp in the beginning of the middle watch; and they had but newly set the watch: and they blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers that were in their hands. And the three companies blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers, and held the lamps in their left hands, and the trumpets in their right hands to blow withal: and they cried, "The Sword of Yahweh, and of Gideon" (Jud 7:19,20).

Such a startling occurrence in the quiet stillness of the night terrified the opposition, who were quickly defeated, for in the confusion of events, they fought against themselves (v 22), and so assisted their own destruction. But the victory was achieved by causing the light to shine out of clay vessels, which were broken, by the cry attributing their efforts to Yahweh, and his Chosen captain, and by sounding the trumpet, or ram's horn. And the victory is guaranteed for the disciple in like manner: "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2Cor 4:7). So it is, that the Light must dwell with us, and within our hearts. But the apostle continues, in direct allusion to Gideon: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2Cor 4:7).

The light of the Father's glory must dwell within us, as in earthen vessels, ready to be manifest at the appointed time. Christ himself is the first broken vessel, setting the example for his disciples, for it is he "who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2Tim 1:10). But the deliverance of those who follow him is yet future; at the time of the shout, and the sounding of the trumpet: "for the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them ..." (1Thes 4:16,17). So it is, that life and immortality shall be caused to shine in all the saints, as mortality is put away, and those who have voluntarily broken the earthy "old man" of the flesh in times past shall be caused to shine with elohic splendour in the kingdom of their Father.

There is, therefore, the need for the disciple to engage in the spiritual warfare in order to be recognised by the Captain of salvation, and be granted the victory due to those who contend in the battle, in due time. But also, as we saw, there is a need to build. The disciple must also give earnest attention to the construction of an edifice which will serve as a place of refuge and protection for himself and others, from the dangers without. But what is this tower which he needs to be building?

The Spirit declares the faithful saying, that: “the name of Yahweh is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe” (Prov 18:10). So, the Father’s Name is a strong tower, into which those who desire safety must enter. And this is so, for in baptism, those who desire to follow Christ are baptised into the Family Name of Yahweh: “Go ye therefore, and make disciples of (Greek) all nations, baptizing them into (greek) the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit ...” (Mat 28:19). Notice this; there is but One Name possessed by both Father and Son, and in which the Spirit operates. And those who desire the safety and refuge of the Gospel enter into that Name, and so become part of it, and part of the Father’s Purpose to perpetuate His Character in a whole multitude of sons.

In this regard, it is pertinent to note that the Hebrew word for “son”, is *ben*, being derived from a word which signifies, “to build.” A son therefore, is a builder - the builder of the Family name, the son being the One through whom that name is perpetuated. Those who seek to be disciples, are those who are builders of the Family Name of Yahweh, becoming part of that Name, and members of the continually expanding Divine Family on earth (cp Eph 3:15).

But what is the cost needed to build up the Divine Family, and edify it against the Adversary? The cost is our entire selves; we are no longer our own, for we are bought with a price; even the shed blood of Christ. We therefore must devote all that we have into the enterprise; if we cannot do that, the tower will not be built sufficiently, and the dwellers therein will be exposed to the dangers outside. And indeed, that is precisely what we find to be the case today, when rather than seeking to build heavenward, some seem to be more desirous of bringing into the tower the pollutions of the World, so threatening the salvation of the vulnerable.

Here then, we have presented the principles of discipleship which we must endeavour to follow, and in future issues we hope to turn our attention more particularly to the twelve selected by the Master to be with him in the days of his ministry, with a view to learning from their examples, both good and bad.

Christopher Maddocks