

## The Meaning of Discipleship

Last Thursday afternoon and into the evening, for about four hours, my daughter Rachel and I were stuck in traffic on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. We were heading for a funeral viewing but we never made it. A couple of tractor-trailers and a car had crashed up ahead and no one could move. There were cars in front of us, cars behind us, and vehicles to our right and to our left. We weren't going anywhere. It was the longest my daughter and I have been alone together since she was quite small. It was nice, just hanging out with Rachel. We talked. I told old stories, some of which Rachel had never heard before. Then Rachel gave me a book to look at while she wrote notes and sent and received text messages on her cell phone.

The book she gave me to look at had a strange title and some very interesting observations about what it means to be a Christian disciple. The author based much of his interpretation of Scripture on his knowledge of Jewish teaching and culture at the time of Christ. Since Jesus and the vast majority of his audience were Jewish, this perspective is crucial for understanding what was going on around Jesus and what was meant by His teachings. The meaning of discipleship that I want to talk to you about today is a case in point.

For example, the stories of how Jesus gathered His first disciples has always amazed me. Matthew 4:18-22 tell us: "As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men.' At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him."

What was it about Jesus that He got such an immediate response? Did He possess some magical mind-control ability that overrode the wills of the disciples, or did they follow Him freely? And why didn't their father and mother go chasing after them to bring them back? I remember a portrayal of father Zebedee that Matt Hornberger did a couple of years ago in VBS in which Zebedee

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complained to Mrs. Zebedee, "Who's going to clean all these fish?" But there is no indication in Scripture that Zebedee or Mrs. Zebedee or any other of the disciples' parents **were upset about their children following after Jesus. In fact, the parents of younger children even brought them to Jesus; fighting off the objections of Jesus' disciples, they brought their little ones to Jesus for His blessing. Why, even before He began to do miracles, was it so easy for Jesus to gather disciples from all walks of life? Why did parents bring their children to Jesus?**

Author Rob Bell says in his book Velvet Elvis, that a lot of this had to do with the Jewish culture. In the minds of Jewish parents in that day, the highest honor that could come their way was that their sons should become rabbis. The way this usually worked was that the children would be sorted out in the synagogue schools. Slow or average students would be taught to a certain level and then encouraged to go to work in their father's profession, to become fishermen, carpenters, tentmakers, farmers, etc. Those who showed promise would be encouraged to study longer, to take advanced education in the Torah. And, those who distinguished themselves in advanced Torah studies could hope to be noticed by a notable rabbi who would then invite them to become his disciples. It was a great honor for the whole family if a rabbi should choose their son, grandson, or nephew to become a disciple, and the more famous the rabbi, the greater the honor.

Now given this important background material, we can understand the Scripture more easily. The fact that the disciples Jesus called to follow Him were already plying their father's trades, suggests that they were poor or average students who had not made the cut for advanced Biblical Studies. That a rabbi of Jesus' stature would call the likes of these to come and follow Him as His disciples was unbelievably good news. It was amazing good fortune, amazing grace. Of course, they would say, "yes" to such an invitation and of course their parents would not object; it was a great honor. This also explains why many other young men followed Jesus around whom He did not specifically call; if this rabbi invited other ordinary people to follow Him, maybe He would open the door for them too.

Another insight that Rob Bell brings to the meaning of

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discipleship is that the goal of a disciple was not just to learn from his rabbi; his goal was to become just like his rabbi. It was said that the best disciples were those who followed their rabbi so closely that they would be covered with the dust from his sandals. This notion helps us understand Peter, for example, who after seeing Jesus walk on water on the Sea of Galilee, **wanted to try it too. He wanted to be just like his rabbi, just like his teacher; he wanted to be just like Jesus. Jesus says in Matthew 10:24-25: "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. . . ."** At the last supper as described in John 13:13-15, **Jesus said to His disciples: "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' (or rabbi and Lord), and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."** Jesus says in John 14:12, **"I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. It is not enough for us to follow Jesus. We are called to become like Him."**

One other thing in Rob Bell's book that especially caught my attention had to do with the interpretation of the Scripture found in Matthew 11:28-30. There Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

What does Jesus mean by the phrase, "take my 'yoke' upon you?" We know about ox yokes and the collars that are used to team oxen together and horses together to pull plows and wagons, but there is more to this than that. At the time when Jesus walked on earth in human flesh, a rabbi's body of teaching, or his particular interpretation of Scripture was said to be his "yoke." Some rabbis were harsh and demanding in their interpretation of Torah; they put a hard and heavy "yoke" on their disciples. Matthew 23:1-4 say, "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads

and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." The teachers of the law and the Pharisees had an impossibly heavy "yoke." Other rabbi's had a more moderate "yoke." But Jesus said that His "yoke" "is easy" and that His "burden is light." We need to know that the yoke of Jesus lifts our burden of guilt and gives us peace and joy.

But to say that Jesus' yoke is easy and that His burden is light, is not to say that those who follow Him will not need to be courageous. His yoke is easy but not cheap; His burden is light but not for light-weight disciples. Following Jesus was not for woosies then and it's not for woosies now. We know this immediately from His words in Luke 9:23, where He says ". . . to them all: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.' The yoke borne by the disciples of Jesus is shaped like a cross. It is made light and easy by the promises that lay beyond it, but it also brings suffering and death. To take His yoke is to die to ourselves and to our own agendas and follow Him. The cross raises the specter of persecution and great trials. There will be a price to pay to be like Jesus.

I don't know about you but I for one am glad that by the time we gather next Sunday the race for the presidency of the United States will be over. I'm tired of hearing about it, tired of all the bickering back and forth. And for all the talk about "change," no matter who wins, I am not optimistic that this year's election will do much to improve the moral and spiritual condition or direction of our nation. Roe vs. Wade is not going to be overturned, the march toward legalizing gay marriage in every state is going to continue, television programming will continue its slide toward "anything goes." The stress at the stock market notwithstanding, the rich are going to keep getting richer and the poor will continue to struggle. Greed on Wallstreet and corruption in Washington are going to continue regardless of who sits in the Whitehouse.

But I want you to know something about those of us who have committed our lives to follow Jesus: We are not disciples of John McCain and we are not disciples of Barack Obama; We are the disciples of Jesus Christ. He's the One we wish to emulate. He's the One to whom we owe our allegiance. He's the One whose marching orders we follow. It is the ethics of His kingdom we

proclaim and into which we invite others to come. As Paul puts it in Romans 14:8, "if we live it is for Christ that we live and if we die it is for Christ that we die." It is His kingdom in which we find our true citizenship and ultimate hope. It is the presence of His kingdom within us that causes us to be joyful in tribulation and confident of better things to come.

So what does it mean for us to be disciples of Jesus Christ? #1, it means that we have heard or sensed His call to come and follow Him. Becoming a Christian is not something we volunteer for; rather it is a response to the work of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts and minds. **Disciples of Jesus have been called and chosen by the Holy Spirit to follow Him.**

#2, to be disciples of Jesus is to be followers of Jesus, and the goal of following Him is to become like Him, to be of one heart and one mind with Him. It is to be indwelt, impelled, and empowered by the same Spirit. We are meant to become like Him, to love God the Father the same way He did, to love people with same intensity He did, to hate injustice as He did, to have the same sacrificial spirit. **It is enough for the disciple to become just like his master.**

#3, to be disciples of Jesus means being in this the world without being owned by this world. While others seek worldly wealth, power, recognition, and status, our purpose and greatest joy is to bring a smile to the face of our Father in Heaven. We live for His pleasure and for His purpose and our reward is His kingdom. **Our purpose as disciples of Jesus Christ is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.**

Have you heard or sensed the call of Jesus for you to come and follow Him as His disciple? Have you said "yes" to that call? Are you striving to follow Him and to become like Him, to be one with Him in heart and mind and Spirit? Do you understand that your purpose now and forever is to love and glorify God and to find enjoyment in His smile? Come, take His yoke upon you. Live for Him, love for Him, find joy in Him, die for Him. Live your life on earth as a citizen of heaven.

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## The Meaning of Discipleship Matthew 4:18-22; 19:13-15; 11:25-30

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