

Jesus Offers You This 12-Step Plan for Long-Term Obedience

I often hear church leaders talking about the paramount need for discipleship in the church, rightfully so. Across the nation, we sponsor major conferences on the theme of “discipleship.” Occasionally I will meet a church staff member who serves as a “Pastor of Discipleship.” I like to think of myself as a dedicated disciple of Jesus—as do you.

Too often, we adapt a culturally comfortable idea of discipleship. A true follower in our day is someone who goes to church, reads the Bible, serves faithfully, joins a small group and even witnesses to others as the opportunities arise. All these are good things but appear to fall short of the core idea Jesus had in mind when He called disciples to follow Him.

Follow Jesus?

This week I revisited the tenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel in my devotional reading. I’ve read this chapter many times, but on this occasion, I was riveted by the clarity and cost associated with Jesus’ ground rules for His followers. As He sent them out on their first mission, setting the pace for their long-term obedience to the Master, He laid out this plan:

- You are going to the least responsive people and they will oppose your message (vv. 5 & 6).
- You have received from Me without pay; give to others without charge (v. 8).
- Take no financial resources with you (v. 9).
- Take only one set of clothes (v. 10).
- You won’t know where you are staying until you get there (v. 11).
- Stay there as long as they will have you, then move on

(vv. 12-14).

- You are going out like sheep among a pack of wolves, vulnerable and in danger (v. 16).
- You will be arrested and beaten (v. 17).
- Do not plan your presentations or legal defense in any way (vv. 18-20).
- You can expect betrayal from your family because of your obedience to Me (v. 21, also vv. 34-37).
- You will be hated by many because you follow Me (v. 22).
- You must take up your cross and follow Me. In other words, be prepared to die because of your discipleship (v. 38).

If this were the content of your pastor's altar call next Sunday as he appeals for converts, church members, or volunteers, I wonder how many would respond. If these were the goals of your church's discipleship program, I wonder how many would sign up.

The Standard of the Call

Discipleship leader John Herman stated, "Discipleship to Jesus Christ is the intentional, communal, lifelong journey of being conformed to Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish God's purpose in the world." Jesus' design for discipleship was based on the standard of His own life and sacrifice. He stated, "The disciple is not above his teacher, nor the servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master" (10:24-25). Philippians 2:4-8 speaks of His sacrifice in leaving the glories of heaven, coming as a servant, and willingly subjecting Himself to the humility and cruelty of death on a cross. When the standard is clear and compelling, the sacrifice and sustained commitment can become a delight rather than a burden.

The Greater Reality

Alongside this seemingly kamikaze mission, Jesus gives promises and reassurances associated with the calling. These realities inspire our dedication and determination.

- I will give you power to accomplish the supernatural (vv. 1 & 8).
- You will be messengers of the kingdom of heaven (v. 7).
- My very Spirit will speak through you with the right words at the right time (v. 19).
- You do not need to fear because I know you and value you beyond measure (vv. 29-31).
- I will confess you before My Father in heaven (v. 32).
- As you “lose your life” for Me, you will gain real life (v. 39).

The Right Fear

We all conduct our lives based on the things we believe, value and respect. We make choices about what we will do with our energy, our time and our money based on these conclusions. Some value riches and fear poverty. Others value notoriety and fear obscurity. Some value acceptance and fear loneliness.

At the centerpiece of this commission to His disciples, Jesus says, “Do not fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). The willingness of Jesus’ followers to embrace Him and follow His difficult discipleship path would need to be rooted in a profound reverence for God. They were to value a life expended for the sake of the eternal soul, not just the trappings of life in this body. They would mark their significance by eternity’s scoreboard and not by their navigation of an easy or successful path in this life.

Our Application

I’ve often heard Pastor Jim Cymbala say, “The highest form of worship is sacrifice.” As I look at the lives of biblical

heroes, church fathers and notable believers through the ages who brought great glory to Christ, the common denominator was a life of sacrificial worship, obedience, and love. This core commitment motivated all they did, the choices they made, and the mark they left on the lives of people.

To be a disciple should include the processes of growth that we often pursue in the context of church programming. Yet, Jesus' demands remind us that the heart of a real New Testament disciple is always pursuing the pathway of price in choices about time, money, possessions, relationships, and life focus. As I often say, "The comfort zone is the danger zone." Real disciples recognize and reject the comfort zone because they have learned that too much time spent in it quenches faith, feeds self-indulgence, breeds apathy, diffuses impact and undermines Christlikeness.

I don't know what this means for you today. I do know that every day we are confronted with choices about how we will think, speak, live and serve. In every decision, we must trust Him for the grace to elevate and embrace Jesus' words, "Take up your cross and follow Me."

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