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UNDERSTANDING GOD'S CALL

PART I

Lesson 1: Disciples of Jesus Christ

Lesson 2: Members of Christ's Body

Lesson 3: Strangers in the World

"I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus [the upward call of God, NASB]" (Philippians 3:14).

The world drags us downward. The devil tempts us downward. Our own desires exert a continual downward pull. It is *God* who calls us upward through His Son, Christ Jesus.

God the Son came down and lived among us. He offered us an alternative to this world—Himself. He conquered the devil and broke all his powers by a glorious resurrection from the dead. This Son of God asks us to forsake the world, resist the devil, surrender our entire being to Him, and *come and follow Him*.

This is an upward call! It is a lifelong climb. It is a discipleship after Jesus Christ, a life lived in communion with Him, being completely under His direction. It is a glorious ascent that will one day burst into the eternal realms of light where we will be at home forever with the One we followed on earth.

The first three lessons of this study will take us to the Bible to understand the heart of God's call. What does He really expect from us? We will learn that God calls us to be disciples of Jesus, that this call brings us into the assembly of other disciples (the church), and that this call sets us apart from the world.



DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

Many today who claim to be Christians have little understanding of what it actually means to follow Jesus. They want to share the benefits of Christianity, want to claim the promises of the Bible, want to go to Heaven when they die, but live the majority of their lives without regard to Christ. Are they disciples of Jesus? Are they Christians? The goal of this study will not be to make you judges of others, but to challenge you to discipleship and to give you a base for challenging others to discipleship.

The truth is that a man would only be fooling himself if he claimed to be a farmer but spent 90 percent of his time and effort doing other things, and if his 10 percent “involvement” in farming was only passive—listening to others talk about it, thinking about it, talking about it, but never actively farming. Many similarly are deceived today about their “Christianity” because they spend several hours a week in church where they listen to the preacher, make a few comments in Sunday school, give an offering, visit with other church members afterward, and go home.

Such Christianity offers little relationship with Jesus, allows much worldliness (even under the guise of a “separated” life), and is largely impotent in reaching the lost. It is not a life of discipleship.

PERSONAL INVENTORY

1. How would you rate the general discipleship concepts in your religious environment?

- | | |
|------------|-----------------|
| a. strong | c. needing help |
| b. average | d. sick |

2. If your answer above is not a., what do you think are major reasons for the situation?

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------|
| a. lack of understanding | d. false doctrine |
| b. spiritual deception | e. (other) _____ |
| c. worldly influences | _____ |

3. How would you rate your own discipleship?

- | | | |
|-------------|----------------|--------------|
| a. strong | c. backslidden | e. miserable |
| b. untaught | d. average | f. not sure |

4. In a few sentences: (a) describe your commitment to Jesus as it presently stands, and (b) state what you would like to learn about discipleship.

SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And they straightway left their nets, and followed him. And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them. And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him (Matthew 4:18-22).


The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord (Matthew 10:24, 25).

And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away? (Luke 9:23-25).

And there went great multitudes with him: and he turned, and said unto them, If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:25-27, 33).

UNDERSTANDING THE SCRIPTURES


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Observation 1  Jesus called some to follow Him in a teacher/learner relationship during His earthly ministry.

For these disciples, this meant leaving their earthly businesses and devoting themselves to their calling to become “fishers of men.” Simon, Andrew, James, and John left the fishing trade and began to learn from Jesus how to live and

teach the ways of the kingdom of God, and how to bring others into a life of following Jesus. For these men, it meant spending time with Jesus, hearing His teaching, obeying His instructions, and following His way of life.


We should not assume from this that what they were doing before was wrong or beneath the dignity of men and women in the kingdom of God. Rather, we realize that being disciples and then apostles sent out by Him was what they were born for, what they were designed and gifted for, and the means by which they could best glorify God with their lives.

Observation 2  **For believers, all work that fits within one's calling is sacred.**

The fishermen, carpenters, and farmers who continued fishing, building, and farming to the glory of God were, like the twelve disciples, doing “holy work.” Throughout Jesus’ ministry, He and His disciples needed sandals and clothing and food. Those who “ministered unto him of their substance” (Luke 8:3) were laborers in the kingdom right alongside the twelve.

And we should not assume that only the portion of our labor that finds its way into the church treasury is sacred. We can live all of life to God’s glory if we are doing what He has called us to do and we are doing it to the best of our ability.

For the twelve disciples of Jesus, of course, following their calling meant giving up their former occupations. And after Pentecost, the call to follow Jesus became the call to proclaim Jesus to the ends of the earth. The disciples were so committed to this ministry that when special needs arose, they called others to “serve tables” so they could give themselves “continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

Observation 3  **Work on behalf of souls is a work to which all Christians are called to contribute and a work some are called to labor in full-time.**

When Jesus said, “I will make you fishers of men,” He was using an analogy to describe ministry to people’s souls. This kind of work includes evangelism—telling others about Jesus and calling them to believe in Him. It also includes, as He later explained, “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20).

When we testify to unbelievers about what God has done in our lives or when we encourage fellow Christians in the faith (something Hebrews 3:13 asks us to do daily), we are working directly on behalf of people’s souls. When we worship together, when we read and explain the Scriptures, when we help those in need, or when we spiritually strengthen one another in any way, we are edifying the body of Christ. God’s Holy Spirit gives special grace to each believer to minister in some way.

But as we see in our text, Jesus called some of His followers to be engaged in this kind of work full-time, and we can assume He still calls some to this kind of ministry and gifts them accordingly.

Study Questions

1. What did Jesus’ call to Andrew, Peter, James, and John mean for them? What was their response? What changes do you think Jesus’ call brought into their lives?
2. What did Jesus mean when He said, “I will make you fishers of men”?
3. How do we understand the relative value of fishing for fish and fishing for men? How might we become imbalanced in this?