

"Learning Discipleship from the Disciples"
Simon the Zealot: A Freedom Fighter who Found Faith
Luke 6:12-49
John Breon

This apostle is Simon the Zealot. Not Simon Peter, but another Simon who is identified as a "Zealot." A zealot is someone who is zealous, who has zeal. It speaks of passion and a fiery spirit. In Jesus' time, some Jews used the terms *zeal* and *zealot* to describe their passion for the purity of the land, the temple, and the people of Israel. They wanted to maintain obedience to the Law of Moses. They were willing to suffer and die, or to kill, to have this purity.

We can picture Simon as someone committed to the law, committed to purity, resentful of the Roman occupation and oppression of his land. He may have had a special hatred for Jewish traitors who cooperated with Rome: like tax collectors: like Matthew, another of the Twelve. Apart from Jesus, Simon may have killed Matthew before he worked with him. But Jesus brought them together in a transforming way.

So here's a disciple with a revolutionary outlook, a fiery spirit, and a passion for purity. There's nothing wrong with enthusiasm and zeal. We need more of it. But it does need to be tempered and redirected toward God's purposes, not self-promotion or nationalism. Simon may have been ready to fight the Romans to win Israel's freedom. But his zeal was transformed and channeled into the mission of Jesus and the good news of God's kingdom. Jesus took him "from a zealot's fight to a zealous faith" (Jim Buskirk, First UMC Tulsa, tape, May 27, 1990). He eventually traveled to many new places to share this faith. His zeal finally brought him to lay down his life for his Lord. Kenneth Wyatt used as a model for Simon a man who was actually very quiet and gentle, a printer from Texas (*The Apostles* 42).

What about our faith? Are we zealous in it? Are we passionate about our relationship with God through Jesus in the Holy Spirit? Are we enthusiastic for the good news and reaching others?

Bishop Hayes recently told the pastors of the Oklahoma Conference about seeing a bus with the words “Whose life will you save today?” splashed across the side. As he got closer, he saw that it was a bloodmobile from OK Blood Institute. But that question made him think about ministry and discipleship. That question gives an urgency to our calling—all of us, not just pastors. We have a purpose in God’s kingdom. What if we started each day thinking about who God has for us to serve that day?

We were horrified last week at the news of the three teenagers in Duncan who shot and killed an Australian athlete because, as one boy said, “We were bored, so we thought we’d kill somebody.” There are a lot of people in this generation who see passion and enthusiasm as uncool. You shouldn’t care about anything because nothing really matters. But followers of Jesus see things differently. We have zeal, passion, direction, purpose. And we have all of that, and more, to offer people who are hopeless and without anything to care about.

Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We are here to help people come to know Jesus and become followers of Jesus, learning from him and becoming like him. In this chapter of Luke, Jesus gives us a profile of discipleship.

Jesus went out on a mountainside and prayed to God all night. The next morning he called his disciples to gather around. Out of this group, Jesus chose twelve to be apostles. The word “apostle” means one who is sent with a special commission. These were authorized representatives of Jesus. But Luke doesn’t tell us yet why Jesus chose these twelve or what they would be sent to do. He first relates several teachings and miracles of Jesus, showing him as the model for ministry and showing the disciples preparing to go out in ministry.

Being with Jesus, following Jesus, learning from him, watching him and beginning to be like him is what being a disciple is about. So as Jesus comes and stands on a level place, a large crowd of his disciples and people from all over, come *to hear him* and to be healed by him. Though Jesus speaks specifically to his disciples, he expects the crowd to overhear. His message not only instructs his followers, it also challenges and invites all people to this new way of seeing and thinking and living.

One thing we see in this profile of discipleship is that being disciples is not for some elite group. Following Jesus in a committed life is not just for a select few who are especially spiritual. It's for everyone who will come to Jesus. It's what it means to be a Christian. The New Testament uses the word "disciple" 269 times. It uses the word "Christian" three times and "Christian" was first introduced to refer to disciples of Jesus Christ (Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, excerpted in *Devotional Classics*, ed. Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith, 14).

Talk about a challenge that we can be zealous about! Whoever comes to Jesus and enters the kingdom of God he announces is expected to live like this. Jesus not only portrays what being a disciple means, he invites all who are listening to the life of discipleship.

Sometimes on Wednesday nights, Abraham Lincoln attended a church near the White House. He would sit in the study and listen to Dr. Gurley preach. One night a Secret Service agent asked the president what he thought of the sermon. Lincoln replied, "It was brilliantly conceived, biblical, relevant and well presented."

"So it was a great sermon?"

"No. It failed because Dr. Gurley did not ask us to do something great" (Bruce Larson, *Leadership Journal*, Winter '94, 19).

By that standard, Jesus' words are great because he does ask us to do something great. He lays a great challenge before us and he invites us to share a great adventure.

There are five parts of Jesus' discipleship profile here: He speaks about Blessings and Woes, Love of Enemies, Judging, Integrity, and Hearing and Doing.

In the first section, Jesus describes two groups of people. He's not making promises and threats. He's simply stating his insight into the true condition of people. He's announcing the way life is inside and outside the kingdom of God.

On one hand, Jesus teaches his disciples that though they seem to be outsiders because they are poor and hunger now, they really are insiders; they are rich because they have God's kingdom. Though they weep and people hate, insult and reject them, the day will come when they will laugh

and receive a great reward in heaven. They should leap for joy because being treated like that puts them in the company of some of the greatest Old Testament heroes of faith.

On the other hand, Jesus pronounces woe, or sorrow, upon those who are wealthy and too concerned with possessions, status and privilege to be bothered about the kingdom of God. They may be well fed and laughing (in a haughty or foolish way) now, but the time will come when they will be hungry and will mourn and weep. All people may speak well of them now, but it means nothing because that's how people treated the false prophets.

Jesus talks a lot about money and possessions. And much of what he says about money and possessions is warning. Because he knows how deceitful wealth is and how easily we are enticed to put our trust in it, to make it our god. And he knows how destructive it is to serve money instead of mastering it.

Rose Greenhow was a Confederate spy. As the War came to a close, she tried to evade capture and the loss of her fortune by sewing the gold she had gained into the seams of her dress. But the ship she boarded sank, and the weight of the gold made it impossible for a life preserver to hold her. She sank to the bottom with all her wealth (Pierce Harris, in *Illustrations Unlimited* 339).

The next section describes Jesus' disciples as those who love their enemies. It's interesting that Jesus assumes his followers will have enemies. Jesus himself is causing division in Israel. Those who follow him will reflect this division, this call to be in God's kingdom or out of it.

Some are already opposed to Jesus because he redefines how God fulfills God's saving purpose. Those who recognize Jesus' authority and live according to God's purpose revealed in his ministry can also expect opposition. This isn't because God has rejected them, but because their persecutors have rejected God's purpose. Being persecuted because of Jesus shows that we are lining up with God's purpose (Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament).

Followers of Jesus don't retaliate; they don't let others determine their response. We don't *react*, we *act* according to the kingdom principles of

love, goodness, and generosity. People can do all kinds of things to us, but they can't control how we will respond, how we will treat them.

Instead of hating in response to hatred and loving in response to love, Christian behavior and relationships are prompted by God who acts in love and grace toward all people. Imitating this gracious and merciful attitude of God's is part of what it means to be God's children.

Simon the Zealot was listening to all this—and being transformed by the words of Jesus.

Psychiatrist Robert Coles tells the story of a little girl named Ruby whom he met during the early days of desegregation. Coles was intrigued by the seven-year-old, who had to be escorted to school by federal marshals. She would get out of the car and be met by jeering mobs who shouted racial epithets at her. She would pause, bow her head for a moment, and then walk into the school, staring straight ahead. Coles got to know Ruby's family and finally felt comfortable asking Ruby why she always paused before she went into class. She said, "I'm saying a little prayer. I'm saying, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'" (*Homiletics Online*).

Jesus goes on to tell his disciples, "Stop judging"—"Stop condemning." God in mercy does not predetermine who will or will not receive his kindness. Jesus' followers must refuse to prejudge or predetermine who will receive our graciousness. Jesus is restating the command to love our enemies, with the emphasis on what we don't do rather than what we do.

When Jesus says here, "Forgive," the word he uses means "release." Release was a big part of the ministry of Jesus as the one anointed by God's Spirit. He's telling his followers to release others from their obligations, or, as he said earlier, to "give without expecting a return." Yet, when Jesus' followers do give freely, without dragging others into a never-ending cycle of debt and repayment, God lavishly rewards them. Like a merchant who is neither stingy nor fair to himself but overfills the measuring scoop or basket, God pours abundant blessing on the generous.

In verses 39-42 the central image is the human eye. The blind leading the blind means both will fall into a hole. You become like the one you

follow and learn from and are trained by. So we should be careful whom we follow.

There's also a word of hope here: When fully trained, we will be like Jesus, our teacher. That's the goal and purpose of all that Jesus says here. God's intention and goal for each of us is to be like Jesus. Here's where our church's vision statement comes in: "To be the head, the heart and the hands of Christ—thinking like Jesus, loving like Jesus, serving like Jesus."

In the saying about the speck and the log in the eye, Jesus addresses the moral superiority that makes us critical of others but not of ourselves. This is not saying that we have to have all our problems worked out before we can help someone else. But we do need to be honest about our problems and faults. If not, it's like not noticing we've got a 2x4 stuck in our eye!

Bob Tuttle tells about meeting some people and growing to like them and then later learning that they lived a lifestyle he believes is immoral. Should he back up and start unliking them? No, he thought, it's possible to like people as persons while rejecting their sinful behavior. But he also wanted to avoid transferring his disapproval of behavior to a disapproval of them personally because that's a form of judgment. So he made a vow: For the next two months, he would not judge others. For two months he would love people for who they are and let God do the judging. He goes on:

That may seem elementary to you, but I found it impossible. Since judgment comes from feelings of superiority, evidently I feel superior since I found myself breaking my own rule practically every day. I asked one of my students, "What would it be like if I simply loved people for who they are and let God do the judging?" Instantly he replied, "Why, that would be like Jesus." (*Can We Talk?* 104)

Integrity is the theme of the next section. This also shows how we can evaluate without judging. "Every tree is recognized by its own fruit." Someone has said that we are not judges, but we are fruit inspectors.

We also see how to evaluate our own discipleship. What kind of fruit is being produced? Are we developing Christlike character? Are we

becoming more consistent—the same on the inside as we are on the outside? Are our character, our actions and our words consistent? Just as fruit reveals what kind of tree it's growing on, our speech reveals what we are, what's on the inside.

If you're like me, by now you're a bit discouraged by Jesus' standards for discipleship. When I compare my own commitment and behavior with how Jesus pictures his disciples, I sometimes wonder what kind of disciple I am.

But Jesus is not trying to discourage us. He is challenging us. And he's calling us to be all we can in him. Jesus can expect these things from us because he makes it all possible. The parable of the good and bad trees gives us a key. We can produce the good fruit of discipleship only if we are good, healthy trees. Good fruit is a result of good roots. Jesus can transplant and transform us so there is goodness in our hearts that comes out in what we say and do.

Where are we planted? What nourishes us? Are we spending time in God's presence, letting him shape our lives? Are we like apprentices learning from Jesus the Master how to live in God's kingdom? Are we students of Jesus, devoting ourselves to being fully trained by him?

In very practical terms, do we spend time alone with God each day? Do we worship regularly with other followers of Jesus? Are we involved with others in studying and being accountable for our walk with Christ? Are we giving ourselves in some kind of service for God's kingdom? What do our calendars say about our values and what do our checkbooks say about our priorities?

Jesus concludes by pointing out that it's possible to talk well but not do well. We can confess Jesus as Lord all we want and with as much zeal as we can muster. But if obedience doesn't accompany our confession, it won't hold when the storm hits. The storms reveal the difference between interested listeners and obedient disciples (Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation Commentary).

Disciples come to Jesus, hear his words and put them into practice. They are then prepared for all the storms of life and of the coming

judgment. Those who hear Jesus' words but don't practice them are unprepared and face destruction.

Jesus encourages us to hear and obey him and so remain firmly founded in the faith. Simon the Zealot is an example of doing that. Let's join him in being zealous disciples of Jesus.