

THE HEART OF DISCIPLESHIP

INTRODUCTION

Take your Bible if you will and open it to **John 1:43**. It is here that we see *the most concise command Christ gave* –

⁴³ On the next day, He [i.e. Jesus] desired to go into Galilee, and He found Philip. And Jesus said to him, **“Follow Me.”**

Two simple words: *“follow me.”*

Nobody brought Philip to Jesus. Philip was not looking for Jesus. It was Jesus who found Philip and called him to follow Him. He was personally selected and called by Christ.

In the original *“follow me”* is written as an *imperative* (i.e. a command) not as a suggestion. Christ did not say, *“Try to work me into your schedule”* or *“Call me when you can.”*

He demanded an immediate and permanent *reversal of direction*. This speaks of the power of Jesus to produce an effect – the efficacy of His words to Philip, *“Follow me!”*

This comprises what we might call the 1st phase of the disciple’s calling – a calling to *conversion*. Every disciple of Christ is first called to salvation.

Now it must be understood that the process of choosing and calling each of the disciples happened in *distinct phases*. **John 1:35-51** is all a part of **phase 1** – call to *conversion*, a call to *salvation*.¹

This event occurs near the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry, in the wilderness near the River Jordan, where John the Baptist was ministering.

Andrew, John, and the others were there because they were disciples of John the Baptist – *“I am not the Christ...I am simply a voice of one crying in the wilderness.”*

¹ For more on the distinct phases, see John MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men: How the Master Shaped His Disciples for Greatness, and What He Wants to Do with You* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 3-5.

It is amazing to note that followers of our Lord are won through a variety of means:²

1. The first two disciples were won by the testimony of John the Baptist (Cf. **Jn. 1:26** “*Behold, the Lamb of God*”).
2. Simon Peter was won the by the testimony of one of these two, namely Andrew (cf. **Jn. 1:40-42** “*We have found the Messiah*”).
3. Philip was called directly by Christ Himself (cf. **Jn. 1:43** “*Follow me*”). The agency of man seems not to have been used in his calling.
4. Nathaniel was won by the testimony of Philip (cf. **Jn. 1:46-47** “*Come and see*”).

The 19th century Anglican Bishop **J.C. Ryle** wrote the following:

There are diversities of operations in the saving of souls. All true Christians are led by one Spirit, washed in one blood, serve one Lord, lean on one Savior, believe one truth, and walk by one general rule. But **all are not converted in one and the same manner**. All do not pass through the same experience.³

We see that with the disciples, but what makes Philip’s calling unique is that it was our Lord who directly called him to follow Him.

Philip was NOT called to follow Jesus for a short while – this was to be a long-term commitment. This brought about a *real, total, radical* change. Imagine a ship turning around; Philip now is setting sail in a totally different direction for life!

And the promise given by our Lord was that He was to *equip* them in that new life to which he called them to. Here lies the 2nd phase of the disciples’ calling – a calling to *ministry*.

In **Matthew 4:13-22** (cf. Mk. 1:16-20) we are introduced to **phase 2** – a call to *ministry*.

² For more on the harmony of these various means God used in calling the disciples, see Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978), 39-55.

³ J.C. Ryle, “John 1-6” in *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, vol. 3 (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, 1990), 76.

Jump down to what Jesus says to them in **Matt. 4:19** –

¹⁹ ... “Follow Me, and **I will make you fishers of men.**”

Lit. “*Come here after Me...*”

This is what we see with Philip. He could not keep the good news about Jesus to himself. Immediately Philip went and found his friend Nathanael.

He excitedly said to him in **Jn. 1:45** –

⁴⁵ ... “**We have found Him** of whom Moses in the Law and *also* the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

“*We*” – Philip includes himself as one of Jesus’ followers. I love what he says to doubting Nathanael: “*Come and see*” (v. 46).

From the beginning of Christ’s ministry, His plan was to use disciples to win disciples. “*Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.*”

If you recall, Jesus told his disciples in **John 15:16** –

¹⁶ “**You did not choose Me but I chose you,**
and appointed you **that you would go and bear fruit...**”

The Christian life was never to be a spectator sport. There is a great *privilege* in being in Christ, in being a follower of Christ, yet there is a great *responsibility* that is ours as followers of Christ, and that is to:

“Go therefore and **make disciples** of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit...

Sadly, not all obeyed Christ’s command to follow Him. Matthew records in **Matthew 8:21** that there was “*another of the disciples*” who said –

²¹ ... “Lord, **permit me first** to go and bury my father.”

This was not one of the twelve but one from the larger circle of “*disciples.*”

In essence, he was saying –

“Let me look after my father until he dies, then I will receive my inheritance and have enough cash flow to follow you.”

Obviously, he was talking about *a long period of time*, thirty or forty years or more, especially if his father was relatively young.

The truth is that this man did not want to risk losing his inheritance by committing himself fully to Jesus. He wanted to *associated with* Jesus but not be *fully devoted* Him.

Jesus’ response was shocking. He says in **v. 22** –

²²But Jesus said to him, “Follow Me, and **allow the dead to bury their own dead.**”

Q: *What does he mean?*

A: *“Let the spiritually dead bury their own physically dead” or “let the spiritual dead take care of the mundane things.”*

Message is clear: Don’t allow yourself to be distracted by any other duty or command than to follow Christ.

Matthew, on the other hand, responded in obedience in **Matt. 9:9** –

⁹ And as Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax office; and He said to him, “Follow Me!”
And he stood up and followed Him.

His response was *immediate* and *irreversible*, leaving his occupation, never to return to it. Notice in **Luke 5:28** we read concerning Matthew that *“he left everything behind”* (cf. **Lk. 5:11** the 4 disciples *“left everything and followed Him”*).

Then in Luke 6:12-16 and Mark 3:13-19 we are given a 3rd phase of the disciples' calling – a calling to *apostleship*. Luke records in **Luke 6:13** –

¹³ And when day came, He called His disciples to Him and **chose twelve of them**, whom He also named as **apostles**:

i.e. “Sent ones” with a special authority to deliver His message on His behalf. So then, **phase 3** – a call to *apostleship*.

What an enormous privilege and honor to have been called to serve our Lord. But it does remind me of the words of **Zech. 4:6** –

⁶ Then he answered and spoke to me, saying, “This is the word of Yahweh to Zerubbabel, saying, ‘**Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,**’ says Yahweh of hosts.

Just like the rebuilding of the temple was to be done, not in human strength but by divine enablement, the building of His Church is not built by might, or by human power, but by the Spirit of the living God. *Amen?!*

Christianity began with a few ordinary men, whose backgrounds were in mundane trades and earthly occupations. It was a few lowly Galileans who shook the world (cf. **Acts 17:6** “*These men who have upset the world have come here also*”).

This 3rd phase was a kind of internship that lasted some 18 months!

This prepared them for the 4th and last phase of the disciples' calling – a calling to *martyrdom*.

Jesus repeated *the most concise command* to Peter at the end of his life in **John 21:19**. In fact, Jesus said it right after telling him about the “*kind of death*” he was to have – “*stretching out your hands.*”

¹⁸ “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but **when you grow old**, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to *go*.”

¹⁹ Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “**Follow Me!**”

This was Jesus' call of devotion – a devotion that ended in his death but a death that would “*glorify God.*”

Imagine living the last three decades of your life anticipating this event. Yet Peter was willing to sacrifice everything for Christ!

“*Follow Me*” – These two words reveal **the heart of discipleship**.

Following Christ is loving Him, a love that is demonstrated in obedience. Not the perfection of your life but the direction of your life.

When the disciples became followers of Christ, their responsibility was to **mimic Him**. They said what He said, did what He taught, and responded to life the way that Christ responded to life among them. Simply put, discipleship is *becoming more like Christ*.

The Christian has no greater calling or purpose than that of imitating his Lord. That is the very purpose of sanctification, growing in likeness to the Lord while serving Him on earth.

Paul put it this way in **2 Cor. 5:9** –

⁹ Therefore we also have as our ambition,
whether at home or absent, **to be pleasing to Him**.

Back in August 8, 1991, Gatorade came out with a commercial “*Be like Mike. Drink Gatorade.*” It even included a catchy background music for the commercial. I’m not sure how much it improved sales for Gatorade, but it did endear him to children who wanted to emulate his play.

The song went like this:

*Sometimes I dream
That he is me
You've got to see that's how I dream to be
I dream I move, I dream I groove
Like Mike
If I could be like Mike*

Our ambition, my beloved is to emulate our Lord. He said in **Matt. 5:48** –

⁴⁸ “Therefore **you are to be** perfect,
as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The Christian life is designed to reproduce godliness as modeled by the Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, in whose image believers have been recreated through the new birth.

As God’s dear children, believers are to become more and more like their heavenly Father. The discipleship process is then becoming more like Christ – to mimic Him.

We see this theme in Scripture in the proverbs of a wise son adhering to the teaching of his father (Proverbs 1:4–5; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1), and the word picture in **Proverbs 27:17** –

¹⁷ Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another.

The Gospels are saturated with the discipleship process as Christ lived and preached the gospel message (Matthew 10:24–42; Luke 14:25–35).

Paul urged believers to follow his example, as he imitated Christ. He says to the church at Corinth in **1 Corinthians 4:16** –

¹⁶ Therefore I exhort you, **be imitators of me**.

A bold, but justified exhortation. Spiritual leaders must set an example of Christlikeness to follow.

He says in chapter **11:1** –

¹ **Be imitators of me**, just as I also am of Christ.

To the Thessalonians he said in **2 Thessalonians 3:7, 9** –

⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to **imitate us**,
because we did not act in an unruly manner among you,

⁹ not because we do not have the authority, but in order to offer
ourselves as **a model for you, so that you would imitate us**.

Paul did not speak with condescension or pride, but as one who had **discovered the meaning of life**. He urged others passionately and persuasively to become more like Christ.

Peter also urged believers to follow Christ as their example. Peter says in **1 Peter 2:21** –

²¹For you have been called for this purpose [i.e. patient endurance], since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you **an example for you to follow** in His steps,

Thus far I have given you the **WHAT** of discipleship, but in the remaining time I have, I would like to focus on the **HOW** of discipleship.

Specifically, I would like to address how the heart of discipling (*“follow me”/“be imitators of me”*) is carried out with courage.

To be clear, to be courageous is *to act on one’s belief* despite the circumstance. Paul put it this way: *“I believed, therefore I spoke”* (**2 Cor. 4:13**). He spoke what he believed.

In other words, *“My convictions give rise to courage. If I believe, I am going to say it.”* Convictions give rise to action, my beloved.

In the same way, discipleship is to be born out of conviction not only to say, but to do. So *how do you carry out the heart of discipleship?*

BY INSTRUCTION
BY EXAMPLE

BY INSTRUCTION

The objective here is to teach others the Word of God.

Turn to **Psalm 25**. David prays in **Ps. 25:4-5** –

⁴ Make me know **Your ways**, O Yahweh; Teach me **Your paths**.

⁵ Lead me in **Your truth and teach me**,

For You are the God of my salvation; In You I hope all the day.

Here David is pleading for both *discerning knowledge* and *instruction* regarding the “*ways*” and “*paths*” of the Lord. Both are synonymous with one another.

And the tool that God uses to teach us His ways/paths is His Word.

You need to teach the men you disciple that God’s Word is the source of truth. It is “*a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*” (**Ps. 119:105**).

It deals with all the issues of life. **2 Pet. 1:3** says –

³ ... His divine power has granted to us **everything pertaining to life** and godliness, through the full knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.

Our goal, with the time God grants us to communicate biblical truth, not our own opinions. Jesus said succinctly, “*Your word is truth*” (**Jn. 17:17**).

Our Lord left us with this instruction in **Matt. 28:19-20** –

¹⁹ “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

²⁰ **teaching them** to keep **all that I commanded you**; and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Teach them how to pray, how to forgive, and how to serve one another with humility. Teach them about things to come.

Now as a discipler, it is imperative that we do our homework to be *biblical sound*. That is to be grounded and aligned with the whole counsel of God. “*Sound teaching*” (1 Tim. 1:10); “*Sound words*” (1 Tim. 6:3); “*Sound teaching*” (2 Tim. 4:3); “*Sound doctrine*” (Titus 1:9).

ὀγιάινω means “*free from error; correct.*”

Paul tells us in **2 Tim. 2:15** –

¹⁵ **Be diligent** to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

It takes hard work to accurately interpret the Scriptures. We do so not only for our own edification but also to instruct others as well.

We need to instruct men the rich truths of God’s Word. “*The testimony of Yahweh is sure, making wise the simple*” (Ps. 19:7b).

Turn to **1 Corinthians 3**. Paul tells the Corinthians in **1 Cor. 3:1-3a** –

¹ And I, brothers, was not able to speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to fleshly men, **as to infants in Christ**.

² I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are still not able,

³ for you are still fleshly...

Two battles we face as believers: the *world* and the *flesh*. The first is *outside* of us and the other is *inside* of us.

Worldliness is buying into the world’s thinking, attitudes, and standards. It is looking to man for all the answers and not God. On the other hand, the flesh is set on his will and interests against that of God’s.

Both are great obstacles to the Christian and the Corinthian believers were succumbing to both worldliness and the flesh.

They were “*infants in Christ*” he says. Spiritually ignorant. Immature. It takes courage and deep conviction to say to someone “*You are ignoring God’s truth. You seem to be neglecting Spiritual truth in your life.*”

Now truth/doctrine has both milk and meat elements. It is not that you should be *learning new doctrines* in order for you to grow spiritually, but that you should be learning more about the truths of God's Word that you have known for years and taking a deeper dive into those truths.

Now we might declare "Christ died for my sins" = MILK element. Yet that same truth can be understood as it relates to justification, substitution, and propitiation = MEAT element of this same truth.

As a dad, I fight against the thought that I want my kids to stay the same age and not grow up. But we do not want that for the men we disciple. A baby is cute, but a 30-year-old acting like a baby is not so cute. We want them to grow up and be able to receive the solid food of God's Word.

It's been 5 years since Paul first preached to the Corinthians. They seemed content to stay on the more digestible elementary truths of doctrine.

Such behavior stemming from fleshly attitudes must be confronted. It takes courage to say "*you are still fleshly. You are battle with the flesh has you stunting your spiritual growth.*" Cf. **Eph. 4:25**.

Summary: The heart of discipleship is carried by instruction. It takes diligence on our part to instruct men the rich truths of God's Word. Nevertheless, we are calling men to action.

We are not just providing information. We want these eternal truths we teach them to change their lives.

Take Paul's words in **Col. 1:9-10** –

⁹ For this reason also, since the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be **filled with the full knowledge of His will** in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,
¹⁰ **so that** you may **walk in a manner worthy of the Lord**, to please *Him* in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and multiplying in the full knowledge of God;

BY EXAMPLE

The heart of discipleship is not only carried out by instruction but by *example* as well.

I want you go to **Prov. 23**. I love the instruction given in this chapter.

¹² Bring your heart to discipline
And your ears to words of knowledge.

This is a call to pursue and embrace wisdom. Our hearts tend to become preoccupied. But we must reign them in and focus them upon discipline. This is a great passage for the young. It is about putting oneself in a posture of student and subjecting oneself to discipline and instruction.

Notice this is a plea from a father to his son in **Prov. 23:19** –

¹⁹ You, **my son**, listen and be wise,
And direct your heart in the way.

We want our children to “*get wisdom*.” But we know it involves continuing in that way, that is pursuing the right path.

Q: *Who is going to show them what that path looks like?*

Jump down to **Prov. 23:26** –

²⁶ Give your heart to me, my son,
And **let your eyes delight in my ways**.

As believers, we all want our children to pay attention to our instruction. We all pray that they stay on the right path.

But, again, I ask, “*Who is giving him an example to delight in?*”

A: The father! Not someone else in the church. Not the youth pastor!

The father is asking the son to imitate his conduct.

A faithful father not only tells his son the correct path that he should follow – the way he should go but *a faithful father goes before him*.

A faithful father continually is to demonstrate by way of his consistent conduct what the way of wisdom looks like, what bringing your heart to discipline looks like. A father is to be an example to his children!

It's no different in discipleship, we are calling the men whom we disciple to *imitate our conduct* – to have a favorable disposition to our example.

For example men, *exemplify a love for the church*. Exemplify a love for the church. We need to help them understand the importance of Christian fellowship and being taught the Scriptures in the context of the local church. All they have to do is look at your example for this!

I love the church. Christ loves the church. I love what Christ loves. It is the only institution Jesus ever builds and promises to bless.

To Peter He says, *“I will build My church”* (**Matt. 16:18**).

Another area: *exemplify a love for the family*. They will know whether you see children as a true blessing from the Lord or a burden to you.

Ps. 127:3 – *“Behold, children are an inheritance of Yahweh...”*

They will know if you truly love your wife.

Eph. 5:25 – *“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.”*

Men, by loving your wife as Christ loved the church, you are honoring Christ in the most direct and graphic way.

In doing so, you become a living example to the rest of the family and a powerful testimony to a watching world.

CONCLUSION

Beloved, by God's enabling power through His Spirit in the inner man, I pray that He would grant you as disciplers, the will and power *to do* all that He has *required* of you by way of instruction and example.

Both of these dynamics are essential to discipleship.

Instruction without application can lead to arrogance.

Paul said it well, "*knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*" (1 Cor. 8:1).

Example without instruction can lead to a life of habitual and meaningless activity.

Discipleship happens when one believer sharpens another believer by teaching the Scriptures and mentoring him in the Christian life, giving him an example to delight in.

Christ exemplified instructing and mentoring with His disciples.

- They sat at His feet when He taught the truth of God's Word.
- They watched as He felt compassion for the dead son of a widow (Luke 7:12).
- They heard His instruction on the character of a Christian (Matthew 5).

The attention of Christ's disciples was riveted as He demonstrated a walk with God. May God cause us men who sharpens others to follow Christ!

Back in 1979, Pastor John MacArthur gave a 4 part message, two on Sunday, December 30, 1979 and the following two on Sunday, January 6, 1980. He had only been at the church 11 years and there was trouble the church was facing for he says, "*I can tell you after 11 years of being here that I have never seen Satan work as hard as he's worked in the last six months in this church, never.*"

And so he delivers a 4-part message titled, "*How to Destroy Grace.*" Grace won't be destroyed by what the government does, or by the state, nor by the IRS. He said, "*If Grace church is to be destroyed, it'll be destroyed by the people who are Grace Church.*"

How so? If we abandon key biblical commitments, we will destroy what has been done in these last 70 years.

In his 3rd message he reminds the congregation, what can destroy this church is if we abandon *our strong emphasis on discipleship*.

We need to be re-producing ourselves. Likened to running a relay-race, we run the race and pass the baton to the next runner. We pass the baton. Discipleship is simply the means by which we reproduce ourselves, by which we pass the baton to the next runner.

So much has been invested in you, my beloved. We must pass it on to somebody else. We exist as **Eph. 4:12-13** tells us –

¹² **for the equipping of the saints** for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ,
¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, **to a mature man**, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.