“Embracing the Concept of Discipleship”
Matthew 7:13-29

The church has been notoriously famous for following fashions, fads, and trends. Each fad seems to come up with its own buzzword that everyone is talking about until the next fad comes along. Right now, it would seem that everyone is talking about discipleship, and discipleship has become somewhat of a buzzword. On one hand, I am grateful for this. On the other hand, it concerns me. It concerns me because everyone seems to have their own definition of what discipleship is rather than allowing Jesus and the Scriptures to determine it. If the church is not careful, discipleship can become just another buzzword that reduces it to nothing more than a fashionable trend.

Discipleship may sound novel to some, but the fact of the matter is that it has been around for the last twenty centuries. The reason that it may sound new to some is that for decades it has largely gone ignored. The church in the west has been enamored with prosperity and has subsequently produced shallow converts, while many of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world have done a much better job when it comes to understanding the full implications of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

I’m convinced that a return to a biblical understanding of what it means to be a disciple will lead to a reformation in the church in our lifetime. A quick survey of the landscape will reveal this to be much needed.

Somewhere around 80% of Americans claim to be Christian. If this were true, then the United States would be the most godly nation on earth. The fact of the matter is that we’re the world’s largest producer and consumer of pornography. The fact of the matter is that we have more people in our prison system than any other country. The membership rolls of our local churches are full of men and women who live no differently than their unbelieving neighbors. The only difference is that they occasionally visit the local church on Sunday from time to time. So while 80% of Americans may claim to be Christian, it is obvious that 80% of Americans are not following Jesus.

It is evident that many have embraced a version of Christianity that excludes discipleship, a false distinction that the New Testament does not make.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer - “Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship. An abstract Christology, a doctrinal system, a general religious knowledge on the subject of grace or on the forgiveness of sins, render discipleship superfluous, and in fact they positively exclude any idea of discipleship whatever, and are essentially detached to the whole conception of following Christ. With an abstract idea it is possible to enter into a relation of formal knowledge, to become enthusiastic about it, and perhaps even to put it into practice; but it can never be followed in personal obedience. Christianity without the living Christ is inevitable Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ. It remains an abstract idea, a myth that has a place for the Fatherhood of God, but omits Christ as the living Son.”

He says that an abstract version of Christianity is a Christianity without discipleship, and is therefore no true Christianity at all.

Christianity is faith that follows Christ.

Discipleship is not as much a method to be learned as it is a life to be embraced. It is not a class or an optional add-on.

Think of discipleship as spiritually empowered obedience to Christ. It is such obedience that distinguishes those who are saved from those who are not.

We tense up and get nervous when we hear this because it sounds like a works-based faith. Yet, this is simply not the case. Works of obedience are very much a part of one’s salvation, but you simply need to make sure you get them on the right side of salvation. Works don’t precede salvation—they follow it. Thus, discipleship is visible proof of one’s faith in Jesus Christ.

What is discipleship? How do we define it?

“Disciple” - word is ‘mathetes’ and means learner or follower; one who is committed to a master teacher

Michael Wilkins - “Disciple is the primary term used in the gospels to refer to Jesus’ followers and is a common referent for those known in the early church as believers, Christians, brothers/sisters, those of the way, or saints, although each term focuses upon different aspects of the individual’s relationships with Jesus and others of the faith. The term was used most frequently in this specific sense; at least 230 times in the gospels and 28 times in Acts.”
A disciple is a follower of Jesus Christ. To be a Christian is to be a disciple, and to be a disciple is to be a Christian.

The common idea is that a Christian is someone who by faith accepts Jesus as Savior, receives eternal life, and is safe and secure in the family of God; a disciple is a more serious Christian active in the practice of the spiritual disciplines and engaged in evangelizing and training others. However, the Bible doesn’t make this distinction.

A disciple is a born-again follower of Jesus Christ. Trusting Jesus as Savior and following Jesus as Lord are not mutually exclusive—they are one and the same, and you can’t have one without the other.

“Discipleship” - term that describes the ongoing life of the disciple; the state of being a disciple

Discipleship is the Christian life. It is simply following the Master. It is the process of ongoing sanctification whereby the Holy Spirit is making me more like Jesus, in cooperation with my will and devotion.

Spirit-empowered discipleship is being conformed to Christ’s image. The goal of discipleship is always greater Christ-likeness.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes authentic faith as it is seen in contrast to superficial self-righteousness. He distinguishes the true faith of those who are His disciples. Augustine referred to the sermon as the perfect standard of the Christian life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer based his classic book, The Cost of Discipleship, upon these chapters in Matthew known as the Sermon on the Mount.

No other passage makes us face ourselves like this one does, and no other passage more clearly explains the nature of true righteousness and and discipleship like the Sermon on the Mount. Within its precious verses, Jesus describes both the attitudes, actions, and aspirations of those who follow Him.

The concluding verses of the Sermon are among its most important. In this text, Jesus gives His followers at least three illustrations of what true discipleship is. What we find here are three different pictures that illustrate the true nature of discipleship. Jesus says that being His disciple is a difficult road that leads to life, a tree that bears good fruit, and a house that is built upon a solid rock.
1. Discipleship is a difficult ROAD that leads to life

“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

The first word picture that Jesus uses is that of two gates, two ways, and two destination points. With one wide sweep, Jesus determines that every idea and religious expression of man can be boiled down into just two categories—truth and fiction. Every human being is currently in one of two categories—saved or lost. Every human being who has ever lived and has died is in one of two places—heaven or hell.

Jesus explains the narrowness of discipleship. You are either His disciple or you are not. There is no third option.

Narrow gate vs. Wide gate

The first thing Jesus says in the passage is this—“Enter by the narrow gate.” He is calling us to the point of decision.

“Enter” - in the aorist imperative tense, which means it demands a definite and specific action; word of command

When Jesus commands us to enter by the narrow gate, He is calling upon us to choose to enter through it rather than admire it or gawk at it. We are to enter the narrow gate as opposed to staring at it.

The idea is that you and I are presented with a plethora of choices to make in life about how we will live and what we will live for. The world is full of ideas and options for us to choose from.

Jesus makes the appeal in verse 13 for us to enter by the narrow gate, and once we are through it, we are to then travel by the difficult way that leads to life.

John MacArthur - “Here is the appeal to which Jesus has been moving through the whole sermon. He gives the call to decide now about becoming a citizen of God’s kingdom and inheriting eternal life, or remaining a citizen of this fallen world and receiving damnation. The way to life is on God’s terms alone; the way to damnation is on any terms a person wants, because every way but God’s leads to the same fate.”
The choice that we are confronted is between the one and the many, the one right and the many wrongs, the one true way and the many false ways. It’s either God’s way, or it’s the highway. Such a truth sounds narrow minded and bigoted in such a pluralistic and syncretistic society as ours has become.

Pew Research came out with a study a few years back, and one of the significant findings was that 70 percent of all Americans believe that many religions can lead to eternal life, including 65 percent of all self-identifying Christians. Perhaps the most surprising finding was that 56 percent of all Evangelical Christians believe that there are many paths, other than faith in Christ, to God and eternal life.

In this study, it was revealed large numbers of Americans believe that actions or a combination of beliefs and actions can lead people to God. Even among the 30 percent of Americans who say that eternal life depends on one’s belief, nearly half designate that as simply belief in God, a higher power or other generic beliefs as sufficient for salvation. Among Evangelical Christians, only 45 percent clearly affirm that a personal belief in, or relationship with, Christ is essential for eternal life.

Speaking of this, Dr. Dennis Hollinger, professor of ethics at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, writes:

**Dennis Hollinger** - “Increasing numbers of Americans, Christians and even Evangelicals are questioning the long-held commitment of the Church that salvation is found only in Jesus Christ. Among all Americans affiliated with a religion, 52 percent believe that Islam leads to eternal life with God, 53 percent believe that Hinduism leads to God and 42 percent even believe that atheism leads to God. Among Evangelicals, the numbers are 35, 33 and 26 percent respectively. Clearly in recent years, in the midst of growing cultural and religious pluralism, large numbers of Christians are troubled by, or ignore, the claim of Jesus, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.””

Large numbers of people profess to be Christian, while at the same time, deny the most basic claims of Jesus.

In other words, a person has no right to claim Jesus as their Savior if they are not following Jesus in discipleship down the narrow way.

**Difficult way vs. Easy way**

Jesus says that the two gates lead to two different ways or roads, one easy and the other difficult.

One way is wide and easy according to Jesus. The picture is that of a large entrance that opens up into a wade and spacious boulevard. Because of the wide, spacious accommodations, there is no limit to the amount of baggage that travelers can bring. They can take along anything that they please on the wide and easy way. Nor do they have to leave anyone or anything behind. All who travel the wide and easy way are free to follow the inclinations of their own heart. No requirements are necessary.

Jesus says that many are traveling this superhighway in life. This is the way of convenience, the way of the shortcut, the way of the crowd, and the way of popular opinion.

In contrast, the other way is narrow and hard. Rather than having wide and spacious gates free to anyone who would walk through with whatever they want to carry by way of baggage, there is a narrow turnstile that requires every individual traveler to enter. There’s no room for baggage. Groups can’t enter this narrow way all at once; it must be entered carefully and individually.

Only a few enter this narrow gate and travel this difficult way. It is not the way of the crowd, nor is it the way of convenience.

*“Hard” - means to press hard upon; idea of being afflicted*

Salvation is simple, but it is not easy. Grace is free, but it is not cheap. Jesus is simply saying that we come to Him on His terms and not on our own. Discipleship begins with repentance and faith, a turning from self to Christ, and leads to a life of surrendered obedience to Him as Lord.

**Life vs. Destruction**

Jesus says that there are only two different gates that result in only two different paths that lead to only two different destinations. The wide way leads to destruction, while the narrow way leads to life.
“Destruction” - word that describes total ruin and loss in the worst possible sense

Proverbs 14:12 - “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”

The world says follow your heart, while Jesus says, “Follow Me.”

2. Discipleship is a TREE that bears good fruit

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to Me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do many mighty works in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

These are perhaps the most sobering words that Jesus ever uttered to those who claim to be His followers and represent Him to the world. Notice a couple of things in this text:

Recognizing false prophets

Jesus warns His disciples against false prophets, false teachers, false figures of authority who claim to speak truth but are deceptive. He compares them to wolves in sheep’s clothing.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones - “The picture we need to have in our minds, therefore, should rather be this. The false prophet is a man who comes to us, and who at first has the appearance of being everything that could be desired. He is nice and pleasing and pleasant; he appears to be thoroughly Christian, and seems to say the right things. His teaching in general is quite all right and he uses many terms that should be used and employed by a true Christian teacher. He talks about God, he seems to be saying everything that a Christian should say. He is obviously in sheep’s clothing, and his way of living seems to correspond. So, you do not suspect that there is anything wrong at all; there is nothing that at once attracts your attention or arouses your suspicions, nothing glaringly wrong.”
They look legit on the outside, but on the inside they are ravenous. How will His disciples recognize them? He says that we will be able to recognize them by their fruits. How?

- what they say
- what they don’t say
- how they live
- what they produce

Kent Hughes suggests four doctrinal tests to apply to determine false teachers from those who teach truth:

- The false teacher avoids preaching on such things as the holiness, righteousness, justice, and wrath of God
- The false teacher avoids preaching on the doctrine of the final judgment
- The false teacher fails to emphasize the fallenness and depravity of mankind
- False teacher de-emphasize the substitutionary death and atonement of Christ

**Kent Hughes** - “False prophets talk about God. They wax eloquent on Jesus and even talk about His death on the cross. Many do not see them as heretics. They are likable—truly nice people—pleasant to be around. Sometimes churches grow under their ministries, but the following years are tragic, bringing a sea of unbelieving children and empty pews...False prophets encourage us to try to make ourselves Christians by adding something new to our lives instead of becoming something new, and their work never quite rings true.”

**Matthew 18:6** - “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

**Rejecting false professions**

Notice also that Jesus tells His disciples, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.” There will be those who stand before Him when their life on earth comes to an end, who thought they were saved, only to hear Him say, “I never knew you.”
Jesus anticipates the reality of false professions of faith. On the outside, everything seems legit:

- respect for Jesus
- recognition of truth
- rich heritage of works

But beneath the waterline, there was never a true conversion to faith to begin with. Their words reveal who and what they really trusted in to save their souls—themselves. The basis of their faith is not Jesus and God's grace, but their own effort.

All true disciples say, ‘Lord, Lord,’ but not all who say, ‘Lord, Lord,’ are true disciples. Let that sink in.

3. Discipleship is a secure HOUSE that is built upon a rock

“Everyone who then hears these words of Mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

Jesus says that the nature of true saving faith, as expressed through discipleship, is like a narrow road that leads to life. It is like a tree that bears good fruit. Last, it is like a house that is built on the solid foundation.

Application of Jesus' words

Here we find a picture of two different men who build their own respective houses, which simply represent their lifestyles. What they build is like their life here on earth.

One man builds his house on solid rock, while the other builds his house on shifting sand. When the rain fell and the floodwaters began to rise and the wind began to blow, the house on the solid foundation kept on standing while the house built on sand was swept away.
There is a difference in hearing the Word and doing the Word. Solid rock people hear and do Jesus’ words. This is the biblical faith of true discipleship.

Authority of Jesus’ words

“And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at His teaching, for He was teaching them as One who had authority, and not as their scribes.”

True discipleship recognizes and submits to the authority of Jesus Christ, embracing both His person and His work. He saves those who turn from themselves and trust in Him, who place their faith in His death and resurrection, and submit to Him as Savior and Lord.

Remember:

• Grace is free, but it is not cheap

• Salvation is simple, but it is not easy

• Obedience to Jesus is not optional

• True faith is authenticated through discipleship