

Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ

Lecture 7

Jesus: Disciple-Maker

Introduction

- We have studied the popularity of Jesus among the crowds: for His teaching with authority, and for His great miracles of healing and releasing people afflicted by demonic spirits. Without doubt Jesus' ministry among the crowds was all a part of the Father's will.

- But Jesus had a very particular calling and work to do – to prepare a small group of men for the task of spreading the Good News after He had completed His work of redemption. From the long range perspective, Jesus' strategic ministry to this small group was of more profound significance for the growth of God's kingdom than even the works that He would be able to do Himself. See Jesus' statement in John 14:12 concerning the "greater things" that His disciples would do *"because I am going to the Father."*

- Thus in a study of the Life and Teaching of Jesus, it is imperative to give serious consideration to His role as "Disciple-maker."

1) RABBIS AND THEIR DISCIPLES

a) Rabbis with their band of disciples was a common phenomenon in Jesus' day (cf. Mark. 2:18 *"Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting...."*). However, Jesus' disciple-making was in contrast to the general practice in a number of different ways.

b) **Six fundamental elements of Jesus' discipleship in contrast to the practices of Jewish rabbis in contemporary Judaism of His day:**

(From Transforming Mission by David Bosch, pp.36-39):

i) In Judaism of Jesus' time, it was the disciple's (*talmid*) prerogative to choose his own teacher and attach himself to that teacher. None of Jesus' disciples came to Jesus on their own volition or on their own terms. Some wanted or tried to but were discouraged in no uncertain terms – Matt.8:19f; Luke 9:57f, 61f.

(1) Those who do follow Jesus do so because He called them with the command: "Follow me!" The choice is Jesus', not theirs.

(2) The call expects only an immediate and positive response. No indication is given of reservations or difficulties raised. No hint of compromise. The one called leaves "everything" – fishing nets, tax-collector's booth, etc.

(3) Getting up to follow Jesus is identified (in Matt. & Mk.) with repenting and believing. *"In the synoptic gospels repentance (metanoia) is not a psychological process but means embracing the reality and the presence of the reign of God. The call to discipleship is a call into God's reign and is, as such, an act of grace."* (Bosch: 37)

ii) In later Judaism, the Torah stood at the centre. It was for his knowledge of the Torah that a disciple approached a rabbi in order to become his disciple. Only for this reason. The authority was the Torah's, not the teacher's. Jesus doesn't refer to the authority of the Torah in the calling of His disciples. He expects His disciples to leave everything, NOT for the sake of the Law, but rather for HIS sake alone – Matt.10:38f. Only Jesus could say this.

iii) In Judaism discipleship was a means to an end – the end being to become a rabbi himself. Being a "disciple" or *talmid* therefore was only a transitional stage. For that reason, what the rabbi did was to guide and help the disciple to master the Torah. However, for the disciple of Jesus, the stage of discipleship was in itself the fulfilment of his destiny. The disciple of Jesus never graduates into a rabbi. He may become an "apostle" but an apostle is not a disciple with a degree in theology. This shows us that apostleship isn't a high, elevated status in God's kingdom but rather a witness to the resurrection.

iv) The disciples of Judaism were only “students”, nothing more, whereas Jesus’ disciples were “servants” (douloi) – not known in later Judaism. “They do not just bow to his greater knowledge; they obey him. He is not only their teacher, but also their Lord.” (Bosch: 38) See also Matt.10:24

(1) However, the Master is also the Servant. John tells us about Jesus’ washing His disciples’ feet. See John 13.

(2) The culmination of service is Jesus’ death on the cross. See Mark 10:45. Thus servanthood involved suffering – a fundamental aspect of following Jesus. To commit one’s self to following Jesus as a disciple was to commit one’s self to suffering.

v) In Judaism, to follow a rabbi was to learn the particular teaching of the rabbi in order to pass that on to others – becoming “faithful custodians of his insights”. Whereas for a disciple of Jesus, it was to become a “witness”.

(1) Jesus’ disciples, therefore, were “to be with him” (Mk.3:14) = walk with Him, eat with Him, listen to what He says, see what He does; they are invited into houses with Him, they are turned away with Him; they face opposition with Him. They aren’t invited to great achievements but to be “companions” to share in the happenings in Jesus’ life. They weren’t to attach a great deal of importance to themselves and what they could accomplish but to what takes place through Jesus and with Him.

(2) Mark highlights Jesus’ sending them out to preach and cast out demons (3:14f). Following Jesus / being with Him and sharing in His mission go hand in hand. *“The call to discipleship is not for its own sake; it enlists the disciples in the service of God’s reign.”* (Bosch: 38)

(3) In Jesus’ life-time, His disciples were sent out on occasions to preach (though this wasn’t the primary emphasis of their being with Jesus). Jesus endows them with authority to do HIS work. In most cases in the synoptic gospels, the same words are used for the mission activities of Jesus and

those of His disciples, re. preaching, teaching, evangelising, exorcising, healing. The disciples were “Christ’s ambassadors” (2 Cor.5:20) through whom God makes His appeal to people. Their only real task was to proclaim and do what Jesus proclaims and does.

vi) One other difference was that the disciples of Jesus were “the vanguard of the messianic people of the end-time.” (Bosch: 39)

(1) To be a disciple of Jesus means to follow the suffering Jesus *and* look forward to His return in glory (Mark’s focus in particular). The expectation of his *parousia* (Jesus’ second coming) gives the true motivation for discipleship and compels them into mission. They were the vanguard of the messianic people moving towards the time of Jesus’ return.

(2) For that reason, the disciples of Jesus should not regard themselves as an exclusive group of super-followers of Jesus. The term *mathetes* (disciple) was not limited to them. “*They are simply the first fruits of the kingdom....*” (ibid)

(3) This also applies to mission. The ordinary members of God’s kingdom community in the early Church could just see themselves as being disciples but also as those enlisted into Kingdom service. “*The entry point for all alike is receiving forgiveness and accepting the reality of God’s reign; this determines the whole life of the disciple and of the community to which he or she belongs.*” (Bosch: 39)

DISCIPLE. *A disciple (from Lat. discipulus, ‘pupil, learner’, corresponding to Gk. mathētēs, from manthanō, ‘to learn’) is basically the pupil of a teacher. The corresponding Heb. term limmūd¹ is somewhat rare in the OT (Is. 8:16; 50:4; 54:13; cf.*

Lat. Latin
Gk. Greek
Heb. Hebrew

¹ 3928 לִמּוּד [limmūd, limmud /lim·mood/] adj. From 3925; TWOT 1116a; GK 4341; Six occurrences; AV translates as “learned” twice, “disciple” once, “taught” once, “used” once, and “accustomed” once. 1 taught, learned, disciplined. 1A taught. 1B accustomed to (something). (Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon)

Je. 13:23), but in the rabbinical writings the talmud (cf. 1 Ch. 25:8) is a familiar figure as the pupil of a rabbi from whom he learned traditional lore. In the Gk. world philosophers were likewise surrounded by their pupils. Since pupils often adopted the distinctive teaching of their masters, the word came to signify the adherent of a particular outlook in religion or philosophy. (New Bible Dictionary, Third Edition)

- (4) Jesus called certain disciples to Himself though some came to Him wanting to enrol as His disciples – cf. Luke 5:1-11; Mark 1:14,16; Luke 9:57-58,61-62.

2) The discipleship of Jesus was unique in its REQUIREMENTS:

a) The demands of Jesus' discipleship:

- i) It wasn't just a matter of learning a particular teaching from the Rabbi but a matter of following the Rabbi and obeying all He taught and commanded.
- ii) They were not just to hear the Gospel of the Kingdom but were to order their lives according to Kingdom values and goals.
- iii) In these disciples, God's kingdom reign was realised or fulfilled. They were to be revolutionaries of God's will – *"What was required ... was a total response to the complete truth of God."* (New Testament Speaks, Glenn Barker, William Lane & J. Ramsey Michaels; Harper & Row, 1969, page 90)

b) The involvement of Jesus' discipleship:

- i) The disciples were called to become "fishers of men" (Luke 5:10). Following Christ did not mean a retreat to some desert hideaway in order to listen to the instruction and discourses of their rabbi, isolated from the trials, troubles and threats in the real world.
- ii) Jesus' call to His disciples meant a call to mission. Jesus prepared them to go out into the world and catch men. They were to proclaim to *all* men the Good News of the Kingdom of God that had come among men in the Person of Jesus, the King, by both word and works/deed.

c) The cost of Jesus discipleship:

- i) They were to leave all else in order to be with Jesus (Mark 3:14; Luke 5:11, 27-28; 18:22,28) – *“Disciples are those who have entered into such a close relationship to Jesus that they literally share his life situation, even at the cost of severe personal deprivation.”* (NT Speaks: 90)
- ii) Discipleship of this level requires a person to give up everything he possesses, to forsake every human bond or relationship that might have a hold or grip on his heart, as well as every form of earthly security.
- iii) Once the decision is made, it is final (Luke 9:62 *“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”*).

3) The discipleship of Jesus was unique in the magnitude of its

REWARDS:

- a) The privilege of understanding the mysteries of God including of the Kingdom of God – to know God as “Father” – see Matt.11:25-27.
- b) The privilege of having access to God and being able to ask the Father for good gifts – Luke 11:5-13.
- c) The privilege of inheriting the Kingdom of God – including having God as Father who helps meet all their material needs – Luke 12:31-32; Matt.6:33
- d) The number of Jesus’ disciples were never totalled but it was not small:
 - i) a great crowd – Luke 6:17; 19:37
 - ii) the twelve – Mark 3:14-19
 - iii) a group of 70 – Luke 10:1 ff.
 - iv) certain individuals such as Joseph of Arimathea – Luke 23:50; Mark 15:43, Nicodemus – John 3:1 ff., and Cleopas – Luke 24:18
 - v) a large group of women – Luke 8:1-2
 - vi) the 500 to whom He reveals Himself after His resurrection (1 Cor.15:6) and the 120 who met in the Upper Room in Jerusalem most likely belong to the above number (Acts 1:15).
- e) Though there were some differences in the level of involvement among Jesus’ disciples, nevertheless it needs to be said that there weren’t different tiers or levels of discipleship – *“As the gospel is essentially one word, so discipleship has only one dimension. The demand upon the newest disciple differs not at all from that required of those who stand closest to Jesus.”* (NT Speaks: 92). For that reason, the Gospel writers are not concerned to highlight to which group Jesus was speaking when He was

addressing His “disciples” – whether the three, twelve, 70 etc. – see Mark 13:37
“*What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'*”

4) The significance for Jesus’ ministry of His choice of *Twelve*

disciples:

- a) Note that He made this choice after a whole night in prayer (Luke 6:12 f.). Jesus chose 12 men to be His constant companions for the next three years of life and ministry. Initially they made a circuit of the Galilean cities preparing the way for Him by healing the sick, casting out demons, and announcing the Kingdom of God (Mark 6:7-13; Matt.10:1-4). After this they accompanied Him on all His journeys, including the final one to Jerusalem.
- b) Through Jesus’ choice of 12 (twelve) disciples, we gain a deeper understanding of Jesus’ mission – the number “twelve” was meant apparently to correspond to the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Through Jesus’ coming, proclamation and sacrifice, a new people of God was to come into being. Twelve disciples were to be the visible demonstration or the first fruits of this new reality – “*This new Israel does not exist over against the old, but for it.*” (NT Speaks: 92). God desires to bring about a renewal among / of the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt.10:6).
- c) Two noteworthy characteristics of the Twelve:
 - i) In the Gospels we see them acting on behalf of the wider circle of Jesus’ followers. Their responses to Jesus’ call and their implementation of Jesus’ mission seem to be regarded as “typical” – in their personalities and social backgrounds we can probably see the wider cross-section of the new community of faith. They certainly were not looked upon as “an elite hierarchy” in the church. They weren’t learned or religious men (though they were pious) but ordinary people with ordinary professions such as fishing, collecting taxes etc. (see Mark 2:17; Acts 4:13)
 - ii) Their closeness to Jesus on a daily level meant that they were better able to receive instruction from Jesus and to become better interpreters of His words and deeds. In the Early Church they functioned as authoritative teachers and witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 1:22; 2:42). However, they do not function as an “institution” or an apostolate that wished to perpetuate itself throughout the generations to come (cf. apostolic succession).
 - iii) Organisationally the early church revolved around the leadership of James and the elders in Jerusalem while the mission of the church functioned

primarily through the ministries of Peter and Paul. *“Once the twelve disciples had borne witness to Jesus’ redemptive deed and passed on the word with which Jesus had instructed them, their function as the Twelve ceased. From then on their task was no different from that of the other disciples. They served as guardians of the tradition as well as missionaries and teachers, but this task, like the others, was shared by all who had been with Jesus from the beginning (cf. John 15:27; Luke 1:2).”* (NT Speaks: 93)

Conclusion

- Not only did Jesus make disciples of those closest to Him – both His Twelve disciples but also others in His intimate circle – but He also commissioned them to go everywhere with the Good News, making disciples of all nations (Matt.28:19). Jesus could inaugurate this plan because He had so fully disciplined the Twelve (though we know that Judas Iscariot failed to become a *true* disciple of Jesus).

- Disciple-making is a top priority aspect of Christian mission and is absolutely fundamental to the carrying out of God’s plan to bring the Good News to all the nations – then and now.

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