

A Disciple's Life

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on January 19, 2020.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Matthew 16:13–28).

If asked your religion, you would likely state “Christianity”; you would identify yourself as a “Christian.” Yet, we do not find this title in any of the four Gospels, Jesus never uses it, and it is used sparingly (only three times) in the rest of the New Testament. Instead, a term used more frequently to describe a follower of Christ, specifically in the Gospels, is disciple, a term meaning more than just a student but rather one who actively imitates the life and teaching of his or her master.¹

Therefore, “disciple” serves as both a title and a description. We are by God’s grace, disciples of Christ. But what does this look like? Do we have a specific example to consider in what it means to be a disciple? And what does this discipleship entail?

One example we are given is the Apostle Peter, one of the first disciples of Jesus. What we find in Peter is a genuine example of the good, the bad, and even the ugly. I see so much of myself in Peter (mostly the ugly). So, let’s consider Peter, and our Lord’s interaction with him, as our case study of a disciple’s life.

¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Jesus as Rabbi in the Fourth Gospel,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 8 (1998): 97-128.

Confessing Christ

Moving northward from the Sea of Galilee into the Gentile district of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus was likely afforded a respite from the crowds and a more intimate time to talk and interact with his disciples. Seizing the opportunity, Jesus poses this searching question: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Using one of his favorite self-expressions, drawn from the Prophet Daniel, implying humility, suffering, and an eventual regal reign, Jesus asks who people think he is.

Excluding the Pharisees allegation that he is from the devil, the opinions vary but are all in keeping with a prophet: First, there is Jesus’ cousin John the Baptist, who had recently been executed. Second, there is Elijah, the great miracle-working prophet of the North. And finally, Jeremiah, the weeping prophet who called a hard-hearted people to repent. The selection of each is complimentary carrying the idea that Jesus’ ministry is in the spirit of the great prophets of Israel, new and old.

But what people are saying isn’t really at the heart of Jesus’ searching question, and so he narrows the scope: “But who do you say that I am?” The word translated “you” is not singular but plural (and would be better translated “y’all”: “who do y’all say that I am”). I’m lobbying for an ESV Southern edition. And like the kid who answers all the discussion questions in class, Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” To which Jesus replies, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah [or Simon the son of Jonah]! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”

Let’s consider this blessed confession and Jesus’ response more closely. What did Peter confess? First, he confesses that Jesus is “the Christ,” the Greek word for the Hebrew “Messiah.” The Old Testament promised a righteous servant of the Lord who would come like a prophet to Israel, serve as a priest for their sins, and reign as a king on the throne of David. Peter confesses that Jesus is the anointed One, the Christ, the Prophet, Priest, and King of Israel.

Second, Peter confesses that Jesus is “the Son of the living God.” Just as Israel was referred to in Exodus as the son of God (Ex. 4:22), so Jesus came as the faithful Israel. Yet, he is more than representative; He is “the only-begotten Son, begotten of His Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.” He is not a son of the pagans’ false gods. No, he is “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” as Peter rightly confesses.

To this right confession, Peter is not honored for his intelligence or zeal, nor is he commended for his accuracy. Rather, he is the recipient of God’s unmerited favor. As Jesus explained to Nicodemus (John 3), the Spirit of God does not move according to the realm of sinful flesh and blood but rather according to the sovereign redemptive purposes of God the Father. As the Apostle Paul explained to the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

There is nothing in Peter to boast, save the sovereign mercy of God, elected before the foundation of the world, born again through the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit, justified as righteous, adopted into the family of God, and being progressively sanctified, as a blessed disciple of Christ, the Son of the living God. And this is the confession of every disciple of Christ, every true Christian, a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The confession we witness in Peter is the making of every disciple.

Growing Together

Life as a disciple is not a solitary one. It is a life born through Christ's church and established in it. The life of a disciple of Christ is unequivocally tied to the church of Christ. And because the church is essential to the life of the disciple, it requires a firm foundation, established by Christ.

Jesus says, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." Jesus' given name of Peter for Simon is now fully explained: Peter, meaning rock, will serve as the leading representative with the apostles, as foundation stones of Christ's church. In fact, Paul explains that the church is built on the solid foundation of "the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:20-21).

The word "church" (translation of *ekklesia*) would have been familiar to Peter and the other apostles. Simply defined, the word means "assembly," and is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe the assembly of Israel. Jesus' commissioning words, however, transport this word into a New Covenant context. Just as there were twelve tribes of Israel, there are twelve apostles forming, with the prophets the foundation of a worshipping assembly gathered from every tribe, tongue, and nation, the church of Christ.

And of this church, Jesus says, "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." "The gates of hell" as it is translated here, or better "the gates of Hades," is a metaphor for death. The gates of death shall not imprison the church of Christ, because death has no victory over that which the living God is building. The Apostle Peter would encourage the church with this very truth in his first epistle: "As you come to [Christ], a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:4-5a).

Over this spiritual house, Jesus gives Peter and the apostles the authority to establish his New Covenant church, which we witness the use of such "keys" through Peter and the Jerusalem Council in the book of Acts, and more generally through the apostolic witness of the Word of God. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament serve as the keys of Christ's authority over his church. To know the will of God we look not to one earthly person but exclusively to the written Word of God. Just as Christ directed Peter and the other apostles by the power of His Spirit, so he directs his church by his Spirit through the word of God.

Therefore, the disciple of Christ, having confessed Christ, grows together with other disciples locally in worshipping assembly, the church of Christ. But this does not mean that we are not

tempted and tried by Satan. Nor does it mean that we are perfect or sinless. This does not mean that we may not fall into sin, and even at times assist Satan.

Assisting Satan

At the time of Peter's confession and Jesus' direction to him, the other apostles, and the church, he had not yet finished his earthly ministry. In fact, he commands his disciples not yet to disclose his identity. His time had not yet come. But come it would as he began to explain, that "he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

This is grim news for men who had sacrificed their reputations and livelihoods to follow Jesus. More to the point, it seemed to contradict Jesus' identity as the Christ and the Son of God. How could the prophesied and long-awaited Christ not really and finally be recognized by Israel? Would he not go to Jerusalem to reign upon David's throne? Would he triumph rather than suffer? And how can the Son of the living God die? They had indeed confessed Christ, but their sinful flesh veiled their understanding of his redemptive work to come.

This is no more evident than in Peter. He who would lead in confessing Christ would also lead in assisting Satan. But Peter doesn't see it: "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." Consider his rebuke: As far as it is up to me, Lord, you shall not suffer, or die, or be raised. Not on my watch, because I'm the rock! Perceiving himself to be a faithful disciple, a defender of our Lord, a champion of the church, he falls...hard.

He who was "blessed" for what the Father had revealed to him now hears the disciplinary words of Christ: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." In that moment, this disciple of Christ was not helping but hindering Christ's ministry. In fact, we could translate the word "hindrance" as stumbling block. He who Christ would use as a foundation block in that moment was instead a stumbling block.

Sadly, we too, as disciples of Christ, may assist Satan. How do we do this? Whenever we hinder the advancement of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are, even unintentionally, assisting Satan. Consider your life as a disciple. Are these things in your thoughts, words, and deeds that are hindering the advancement of the gospel? How is your disobedience assisting Satan? We may have a myriad of excuses, including attempting to be a faithful disciple, and yet we are in actuality assisting Satan.

To combat this tendency consider the glorious simplicity, for example, of Paul's testimony to the Corinthians: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). The gospel must be central to the life of the disciple. The righteous life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection of Christ must be the lens through which we see life, a life exalting Christ and denying self.

Denying Self

No disciple of Christ wants to assist Satan, but our flesh is prone to it. Therefore, Jesus says to Peter, the disciples, and to you and me, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." These are graphic words especially for his disciples who had not yet seen Jesus carry, hang upon, and die upon the cross.

The life of a disciple is not one of strength but weakness, not of pride but humility, not of temporal fulfillment but of spiritual growth. As a fellow-disciple, Paul could confess, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). Why is this? Why would Christ call us to deny ourselves?

As we mature as disciples, we learn that Christ is better than anything this world has to offer, even life itself. The world and its pleasures can be alluring, charming even to the faithful. But it can also cause us to take our eyes off Christ, lose our love for the gospel, laying down our cross for a moment of indulging, only to find that the fleeting pleasures of this world are nothing compared to the treasures of heaven.

In God's economy there is no profit to be gained in that which is not of infinite value, as Jesus asks rhetorically, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" There is no return on investment for anything apart from Christ and for his glory. For if the Lord Jesus Christ will in judgment "repay each person according to what he has done," then let the disciple of Christ deny himself confessing,

When he shall come with trumpet sound,
O may I then in him be found;
Dressed in his righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.
On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand.

This is the prayer of every disciple who in denying self is also awaiting glory.

Awaiting Glory

Peter, as well as James and John, would unexpectedly encounter the glory of Christ in his transfiguration. The other disciples would have to wait until Jesus' resurrection and his ascension to heaven. The Apostle John would witness a unique encounter with the glorified Christ and record it in the book of Revelation prior to his death. But every true disciple of Christ will see him truly one day in glory.

Of that glorious day we know this: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He

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will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4). This is the hope and future of every disciple of Christ, awaiting glory.

Perhaps one of these days someone may ask you what it means to be a disciple. Well, if it helps, I submit to you this sermon. Or maybe even this summary: A disciple is one who by God's grace savingly confesses Christ, rejoices in assembling together as a church, may be tempted but hopefully never assists Satan, to the glory of Christ denies self, and awaits his imminent return and eternal glory. Which is, in short, a disciple's life.