

Benchmarks of a Discipled Believer

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We have heard discipleship described as learning to be Yeshua-like, but how many of us have given thought as to what that means for each of us personally, and how each of us can determine the degree to which we are discipled? Well today I propose looking into that, and I will suggest benchmarks by which we can measure how discipled we are – the level of our spiritual growth. Benchmarks are criteria against which performance can be measured and, in the case of our performance as discipled believers, all the criteria we need are found in Scripture.

Because Yeshua identified the *Sh'ma* as the pinnacle of *Torah*, what could be more Yeshua-like than loving God with all our heart, soul, and strength, and loving our neighbor as ourself? That is right, of course, but love has so many facets that it doesn't make a good benchmark. If I profess to love God, how do I quantify how much I love Him? So, as foundational as love is, I will not list it as a benchmark. Of course, if our lack of love for God or our neighbor is obvious, we can conclude that we are not very advanced in our discipleship.

I have chosen a different approach – (1) determining how close we are to thinking as Yeshua thought, (2) acting as Yeshua acted, and (3) standing for those things Yeshua stood for. These are still not easy to determine, but we are helped by the Bible, which reveals specific things about each of them. Let me begin by pointing out that all three are connected to having a close and loving conversational relationship with the heavenly father, out of which grows faith. In John 5:19, Yeshua said:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner."

In becoming "Yeshua-like," the goal is to see God with our spiritual eyes and hear Him with our spiritual ears as Yeshua did. Hebrews 11:1 says:

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

What kind of evidence is unseen in the natural – undetectable with our physical senses – yet capable of leading us to perfect truth? The only evidence that would cause us to be so certain of something as to be willing to act on it without seeing it in the natural, is God speaking to us spirit to spirit; that is why it is so essential to see and hear our heavenly father through our spiritual senses as Yeshua did through his. **So, I believe that the first and most foundational benchmark of a discipled believer is his having faith – that is, listening for God's voice, and being willing to act on what he hears that he knows to be Him.**

I selected faith as the most foundational benchmark because all other aspects of being discipled depend on first having faith. But the Book of James says that "faith without works is dead," and there is another Scripture that speaks of faith with a different emphasis; it is 2 Corinthians 5:7 and it instructs us:

“For we walk by faith and not by sight.”

The first Scripture I read, Hebrews 11:1, defines faith in connection with evidence that is not seen with natural senses, but 2 Corinthians 5:7 goes a step further, and exhorts us to act on what God says rather than on our natural senses. This is a very important distinction because the believer who is not fully disciplined may have faith, in that when he hears God he is willing to act on what God says, but he hears his fleshly desires also, and gives in to them, so part of the time he is driven by his emotions and feelings rather than by God’s will. Emotions are important to our humanity, but they must not be what drives us to make important decisions.

One emotion in particular deserves mention, and that is the emotion of fear. 2 Timothy 1:7 says:

“ For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

Making decisions based on fear is destructive because fear is the opposite of faith. Think about it a minute. If we give in to fear, what are we saying about our trust in God to protect us? Romans 8:31 assures us:

“ If God is for us, who can be against us?”

Decisions made because of fear often end badly because they are tainted from their inception.

So the second benchmark of a disciplined believer is his refusing to act on feelings and emotions – especially fear – and acting instead on what he knows to be the will of God.

The two benchmarks I have spoken about so far require that we know the will of God by hearing Him directly through our spiritual senses. But God has provided a resource by which even those who have underdeveloped spiritual senses can know His will; it is the “Holy Scriptures” – the Bible – and God expects us to know what’s in it. In military terms, we may think of God’s voice as being our “special orders” for just us alone for specific situations, and we may think of the Bible as being our “General Orders,” generally applicable to everyone. Paul explains this in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 when he says:

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

We are also given the example of the Bereans whom Scripture complements in Acts 17:11:

“These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.”

So my nomination for the third benchmark of a disciplined believer is his regularly studying the Scriptures for knowledge of their contents, because they reveal the will of God for himself personally, and for humanity broadly.

Now related to faith and to not walking according to our feelings, is a subject often referred to as “dying to self.” Its general meaning is that we are to live for God and for others, and count our personal desires as unimportant in comparison. It is, perhaps the most challenging of the benchmarks because, to achieve it, we must rid ourselves of sinful pride, and replace it with godly humility. It is also challenging because temptations to serve ourselves ahead of others are frequent. We may encounter them several times a day, so the battle for many of us is an intensive one. Because of its importance in determining our spiritual growth, I’m going to spend a disproportionate amount of this message describing it, and will begin by reading four Scriptures; the first was spoken by Yeshua, and the other three were spoken by the *shaliach* Paul:

Matthew 16:24 “Then Yeshua said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his pole of execution, and follow Me.’”

Romans 6:10-11 “For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Messiah Yeshua our Lord.”

Romans 8:13 “For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

Galatians 2:20 “I have been crucified with Messiah; it is no longer I who live, but Messiah lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

These are hard sayings because none of us wants to die, yet we are told that in order to live and serve God, we first have to die to self. To illustrate this graphically, I’m going to read something I found posted on the Internet and that I edited to a small extent:

“When you are forgotten or neglected or purposely disregarded and you don’t sting and hurt with the insult, but your heart is happy in knowing you are serving Messiah.” **That is dying to self!**

“When the good you do is called evil, when what you desire is denied you, your advice disregarded, your opinions ridiculed, yet you refuse to let anger rise in your heart, or even defend yourself, but take it all in patient, loving silence.” **That is dying to self!**

“When you lovingly and patiently bear any disorder, any irregularity, any unpunctuality, or any annoyance; when you stand face-to-face with waste, folly, extravagance, spiritual insensibility – and endure it as Yeshua endured. **That is dying to self!**

When you are content with any food, any livelihood, any climate, any society, any interruption. **That is dying to self!**

When you never care to refer to yourself in conversation, or to record your own good works, or seek commendations – when you can truly be at peace with being unknown. **That is dying to self!**

When you can see your brother prosper and have his needs met and can honestly rejoice with him in spirit and feel no envy, nor question God because your own needs are far greater and in desperate circumstances. **That is dying to self!**

When you can receive correction and reproof from persons in authority and also from persons of less stature than yourself and can humbly submit inwardly as well as outwardly, finding no rebellion or resentment rising up within your heart. **That is dying to self!**

If you have been comparing yourself to these qualities as I read them, perhaps you need a prayer break right about now. But don't despair. Becoming disciplined and dying to self are continuous processes that go on our entire lives. We are always examining ourselves, correcting ourselves, and then aspiring to greater accomplishments. **So the fourth benchmark of a disciplined believer is his willingness to die to self, which involves repenting of pride, crucifying his fleshly desires, and cloaking himself in godly humility.**

Next, let's look at idols. Idols are things in our lives that we deem so important that they compete with God for our affections.. God considers idolatry so fundamentally bad that it appears as one of the Ten Commandments that Moses received on Mt. Sinai:

Leviticus 26:1 "You shall not make idols for yourselves; neither a carved image nor a sacred pillar shall you rear up for yourselves; nor shall you set up an engraved stone in your land, to bow down to it; for I am the LORD your God."

But idols are not only carved images and engravings. For some of us monetary wealth is an idol. For others of us someone we love – a spouse or a child is an idol. For others of us the security of a home is an idol. For still others of us, our stature as a professional, or our political office may be an idol. The test of whether something is an idol in our lives is how much attention and effort we give to protecting it, and whether we will go to pieces if that item is taken away from us. Sometimes we can test if a thing is an idol to us without actually losing it, by imagining losing it. Some of the things I mentioned can be very painful to imagine losing, but, if we are willing to imagine the loss of something with a calmness and peace that results from faith, that thing is probably not an idol. **At any rate, my nomination for the fifth benchmark of a disciplined believer is his willingness to rid himself of all idols in his life.**

There are many other benchmarks of the disciplined believer I could expound on, but I will mention just one more – one for which Yeshua chastised the Pharisees; in Matthew 23:23-24 we read:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"

What are the weightier matters of the law? The scripture lists "justice, mercy and faith," but these are representative of a great many others that some call the moral law. The Pharisees and

scribes had their priorities out of whack, concentrating so much on rituals, customs, and rules that they themselves promulgated, that they violated other commandments of Torah that were more important. At the same time, they held themselves out to the rest of the community as virtuous, and judged others for not doing as they did. The result was that they led the Jewish community astray from God's Word.

I am sad to have to say that the same kinds of thing happen today, with some regularity, in our religious communities – both Christian and Jewish. Even the term “religious” suggests it by supposing that people do stuff – religious stuff that the community requires – things that are superficial and do not address heart issues. If they are law at all, they are usually the less weighty kind such as communal customs -- *minhagim*. And that would be okay – even virtuous – if the more weighty matters of the law – things like love and mercy and forgiveness were not violated or forgotten.

What does this have to do with being a disciplined person? It has a great deal to do with it because a highly disciplined person will not have his godly priorities out of order, while a person whose level of discipleship is inadequate most likely will. And it is a superior benchmark because it is completely visible, the only problem being that it is often hard for the person who has the need to see it. **So my sixth benchmark of a disciplined believer is his being fastidious in the weightier matters of the law while not ignoring the less weighty ones, but keeping them in a proper perspective.**

I could continue, but it's enough for now, so let's recap. Benchmarks are criteria against which performance is measured, and in the case of our discussion, the performance we are examining is the level of a believer's discipleship. Benchmarks are valuable in helping us self-assess so we can improve and advance in Kingdom life and service. Here are the six benchmarks in review:

The first and most foundational benchmark of a disciplined believer is his having faith – that is, listening for God's voice, and being willing to act on what he hears that he knows to be Him.

The second benchmark of a disciplined believer is his refusing to act on feelings and emotions, and acting instead on what he knows to be the will of God.

The third benchmark of a disciplined believer is his regularly studying the Scriptures for knowledge of their contents, because they reveal the will of God for him personally, and for humanity broadly.

The fourth benchmark of a disciple believer is his being willing to die to self, which includes repenting of pride, crucifying his fleshly desires that compete with God's, and cloaking himself in godly humility.

The fifth benchmark of a disciplined believer is his willingness to rid himself of all idols in his life.

The sixth benchmark of a disciplined believer is his being fastidious in the weightier matters of the law, while not ignoring the less weighty ones, but keeping them in a proper perspective.

<Include here a seventh benchmark for the Messianic Jewish believer – doing the other six in the context of Messianic Jewish calling and obligation. Speak to the assembly about the Jewish way of keeping the Sabbath as an example.>

These benchmarks are for each of us to examine ourselves – not for us to examine our neighbor. We know ourselves – how willing we are to do what God calls us to do; our neighbor cannot see inside of us to judge that. Finally, let's remember that the benchmarks together add up to Yeshua's reply in Matthew 22:37-40:

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

May we all deeply feel the truth of Yeshua's words and be eager and excited to follow his example, and to be his disciple.