

How Discipled Are We?

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In Scripture, the Greek word “*mathetes*”¹ and the Hebrew word “*talmid*”² are generally translated “pupil,” “scholar,” or “disciple.” The sense in which the words are used is not that the persons to whom they refer are merely students as they would be in a classroom, but rather learners at the feet of a teacher from whom they seek to learn, and whom they seek to emulate.

The concept of discipleship is built into the role parents are to have with their children when, in Proverbs 22:6, we read:

“Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.”

Notice that the Scripture does not say “instruct,” but rather “train up.” The role of a parent is to be a discipler of his or her child, and the role of the child is to be his or her parent’s disciple. Discipleship is teaching by example; the parent or “discipler” displays, by his own conduct, how his child or disciple should conduct himself or herself, and the disciple is entreated to follow. Now clearly, the intent of Proverbs 22:6 is not that the child should follow a parent who is not following God. We can be disciples of men and replicate their worldly ways, but that is not what Scripture calls us to. We are to be disciples of God – not of men. The men who are our “disciplers” must therefore themselves be disciples of God, so that the traits they pass on to us are God’s traits – not theirs. The apostle Paul discouraged such cultic following when, in 1 Corinthians 1:12-15 he said:

“Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Messiah.” Is Messiah divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I immersed none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name.”

And as if that were not clear enough, in 1Corinthians 3:3-7 he also said:

“... for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.”

One of the earliest examples of a “disciple” who was also a “discipler” was Moses. Moses’ approach was to lead the Israelites in being obedient to God’s *Torah* as well as to certain

¹ μαθητής

² תלמיד

instructions (mentioned in Scripture) that God gave him to pass on to Israel. When Moses delivered God's instructions, he did not say "These are my instructions; be sure to follow them." He made sure that the Israelites knew that they were God's instructions; and the one time he did not, he paid the price of not being allowed to enter the Promised Land. We read about this in Numbers 20:7-10:

"Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals.' So Moses took the rod from before the LORD as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, 'Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?'"

Big mistake! Continuing with verses 11 and 12:

"Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank. Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.'"

At first, Moses' ways of discipling the Israelites were to proclaim God's word publicly (e.g. bringing Israel the commandments from Mt. Sinai), and also judging their disputes. There came a time, however, when the burden became too much for him, and his father-in-law, *Yitro*, intervened; we read in Exodus 18:17-23 that he said to Moses:

"The thing that you do is not good. Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself. Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God. And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do. Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be that every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear the burden with you. If you do this thing, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all this people will also go to their place in peace."

We know from the Scriptures that follow that Moses did as *Yitro* suggested, and it led to a good result. So let's look at the men that Moses appointed:

- They had previously been taught "the statutes and the laws".
- They had been shown "the way in which they must walk"
- They had been shown "the work they must do."
- They were found to be "able men."
- They were found to be men "such as fear God."

- They were determined to be “men of truth.”
- They were judged to be men who hated “covetousness” (in some translations: “dishonest gain”).

The process that *Yitro* suggested to Moses was the process of “discipleship,” the intended end result being to produce others, in addition to Moses, who could carry forward God’s work among the Israelites. First, Moses was to intercede for the people and ask God to take charge of the difficulties that were sure to arise. Next, Moses was to stand before all of the people and teach them the *Torah* and how to live, walk, and work, according to it. Out of this educated people, Moses was then to select a workable number of men whom he thought were suitable, but he was to then examine them to assure their abilities and godly qualities. He was not to select women because the roles these men were to have were those of elders.

The process and purpose of discipling was the same for Yeshua, more than a thousand years later, as it was for Moses. Yeshua knew that He, like Moses, could not reach all of Israel during His lifetime and without help, so he chose twelve men to disciple, in much the same way that Moses chose 70:

Mark 3:13-15: *“And He went up on the mountain and called to Him those He Himself wanted. And they came to Him. Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons:”*

Matthew 10:5-6: *“These twelve Yeshua sent out and commanded them, saying: “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”*

Before Yeshua sent His disciples out, though, He taught them. One way He taught them was to answer their questions, such as when one of them said to Him: *“Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples”* (Luke 11:1). And of course we know that Yeshua’s response was to utter the words that we now call “The Lord’s Prayer.” But the reason the question could be asked and answered was that Yeshua’s disciples clustered around Him, in order to learn from observing how He lived and ministered. Yeshua’s invitation to those He chose to be His disciples can be summarized with the words *“Follow Me”* (Matthew 4:19). We sometimes think that Yeshua’s invitation to follow Him only meant “Travel with Me.” More broadly though, he was telling his disciples that they needed to leave the worldly ways of their former lives, and take up the Kingdom’s ways of **His** life.

We know that Yeshua lost one of his disciples, Judas, and gained one after His death, Paul. After Yeshua’s death and resurrection to life on earth, He remained with His eleven disciples for 40 days (Acts 1:3), during which time, He instructed them:

Matthew 28:18-20: *“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, immersing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ Amen.”*

Notice that Yeshua's first "sending out" of the twelve in Matthew 10:5-6 was to make disciples among the Jews only, while His second "sending out," here in Matthew 28:18-20, was to "make disciples of all the nations." This was no doubt in furtherance of Israel's covenantal responsibility in to be the "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" that we read about in Exodus 19:6, and also to be "a light to the Gentiles," as we read in Isaiah 42:6-7:

"I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness, And will hold Your hand; I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, As a light to the Gentiles, to open blind eyes, To bring out prisoners from the prison, those who sit in darkness from the prison house."

It is also why Paul echoed Yeshua's priority of bringing the Gospel message first to the Jew, when he said, in Romans 1:16:

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Messiah, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek."

Now my purpose in giving this message is not for your random edification, nor to explain discipleship as an ancient form of education that worked pretty well for Moses and Yeshua. My purpose is to show that it is important for all of us because it is the biblically prescribed way that we are to grow in the Lord. Just as in Yitro's list that he gave to Moses, our discipleship must have educational, spiritual, practical, and character components – all of them.

There are both differences and similarities in discipleship under Moses compared to under Yeshua. Under Moses, the Holy Spirit was not active in the average Israelite, so his or her discipleship had to be almost exclusively connected to *mitzvah* obedience. Under the New Covenant, the *mitzvot* are still important, but we are in a better interpretive position because we have the Holy Spirit to help us. Yeshua pointed to it when he sent the eleven out to "make disciples of all the nations, immersing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Notice that Yeshua acknowledged the Holy Spirit even though the Spirit had not yet fully come, and would not fully make His appearance until the fiftieth day following Yeshua's resurrection – on the *Shavuot* of that year.

On first impression, one might think that the criteria required to be a disciple of Yeshua are 100% different than those for being a disciple of Moses. Well, they are different, but not 100% different. When we think of being a disciple of Yeshua, we think of becoming like Him in our thoughts, faith, attitudes, and commitment to serving others. Yeshua is our example of ultimate sacrifice – not only His death on the Roman *stauros*, but his life that was devoted to loving and obeying His Heavenly Father, and loving His neighbor – us; in these ways, He exemplified His words in Mark 12:29-31 that quotes from Deuteronomy:

"Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

Yeshua also exemplified His words in John 15:13:

"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."

We really don't think of Moses in any of these ways.

Since the discipleship differences of Yeshua and of Moses are obvious, I won't dwell on the differences, but will go on to show how they are similar; it is that they both require obedience to *Torah* which, broadly understood, means God's teaching. In Moses' case it is, of course, obedience to the commandments of the *Torah*. In Yeshua's case, it is that, plus obedience to Him personally, as he is recorded to have said in John 14:15:

"If you love Me, keep My commandments. "

Now to further tie these two discipleships together, consider that agreeing to obey the will of another, as against one's own will, requires (what we might term) "dying to self." Whether it is obeying the commandments given at Mt. Sinai or obeying commandments given by Yeshua, they are the same because both require putting God's will before our own. Both are therefore the essence of the Gospel message, and cannot be treated separately even though they arise from different eras and different covenants.

So, must I give up my life in order to be a disciple of Yeshua? Must I die a horrendous death as He did? Must I go looking for a friend who is in a burning building so I can lose my life while rushing in to save him? If so, the words of Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5) occur to me: *"Woe is me, for I am undone!"*

Well, that which God requires of us is substantial and is often difficult but, for most of us, our physical lives will not be on the line (although for some of us it will). "Dying to self" is a kind of death that we must all endure if we want to serve God in any capacity. It is not a physical death as Yeshua suffered, but it is, nevertheless painful, because it means serving the interests and needs of others before (and sometimes instead of) our own. It often involves sharing our time, our affections, our possessions, or our money with others.

Now some of us will utter a sigh of relief that we need not die physically, without realizing how painful and difficult "dying to self" can be. Many of us have been taught, from childhood, the protective advice of Sergeant Stan Jablonski of "Hill Street Blues," which is "Let's do it to them before they do it to us!" The fact is, refusing to "die to self" for the sake of others is at the root of much relational unhappiness and personal un-fulfillment, whereas embracing it, with godly faith, is the path to a meaningful life and peace.

By the numbers now:

- (1) "Dying to self" for God and others is the message of the Gospel.
- (2) Preoccupation with self against the interest of others is the opposite of the Gospel.

(3) Our willingness to work on “dying to self” is the beginning of discipleship.

(4) Our honest assessment of ourselves that we are willing to “die to self” and to act against self-interest when God calls us to do so is a mid-way point in discipleship.

(5) If we actually do it when we are tested – that is, God’s leading and succeed in serving others’ needs against our own desires and self-interest while being tempted to do the opposite, we have risen above the mid-point on the scale of discipleship.

(6) If we are consistent in passing such a test, we are above 75%.

(7) There is probably no way of getting to 100%, but we should purpose to get there nevertheless.

The title of this message is “How Discipled Are We?” I didn’t mention it earlier because I wanted you to concentrate on the biblical principles you were hearing and not on trying to answer the question. But, now that you’ve heard the principles, I recommend that you evaluate yourself and try to answer the question: “How Discipled Am I?” However you rate yourself, I want you to know that the elders and I would like to give you our personal attention to help you rise higher.

Advancing in discipleship is a life-long process that the elders and I pursue as part of our normal lives with God. It is a process that requires the continual study of Scripture and being open to the supernatural help of the Holy Spirit. Whatever level of discipleship you believe you are currently on – God will help the elder to help you rise even higher, and He will reward your efforts with a great sense of peace and purpose in your life.