

Introduction

Without a doubt, reading through the Gospels brings us back to the basics of Christianity. That is, the narrative portions, however brief, however focused on the miraculous, challenge us repeatedly with the simple basic claims of Christ. Last week, for example, in the narrative about the paralytic, we found a sketch on forgiveness (the means of forgiveness is faith, the source is eternal covenant love, the fruit is joy, and the reality is certain because the one who knows our thoughts and all the evil that turns over in our minds is the one who declares us forgiven; what a great summary of justification by faith).

Likewise, this week, in the narrative before us in Matthew 9.9-13, we confront another basic of true Christianity, the basic of discipleship. However, what slant on discipleship do we get from this passage? Let's think about the slant or angle as I read the text, noting that the textual unit includes more than one event:

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.¹⁰ And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"¹² But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."¹³ Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

It should be obvious that two events come together in this paragraph. There is the event at the tax booth (v. 9) and there is the event in the house (10-13, Matthew's house, Lk 5.29). The singleness of this narrative and its language of following, going, learning, and calling direct our thoughts to discipleship in general and "Authentic Discipleship" in particular. Thus, the outline has two parts: the core and the components of authentic discipleship.

1A. The Core of Authentic Discipleship

A disciple is literally a learner. Learning is so vital in the Christian life that we can hardly overstate the fact. However, it bears repeating that the learning that characterizes Christianity is eminently practical because a truly Christian learner is a follower. **"Jesus saw Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him"** (v. 9).

When we think about ourselves as disciples, we may emphasize in our minds that we are people who have committed ourselves to Christ as our prophet and teacher. Therefore, we say in our hearts, "I am a learner and I am committed to follow; specifically, I am a learner under Christ as my teacher and I am committed to following Him." This is good as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. I hope you are wondering what I mean. To make the point with emphasis, discipleship is more than being a learner, it is more than learning (more than book knowledge), and it is more than a commitment to follow Christ regarding what we learn. It means that we *follow through* on our commitment to learn and follow.

Truly, a disciple is a learner/follower. Discipleship involves going and learning (v. 13). It means getting up from our beds each day (no longer paralyzed by sin, cf. Mat 9.2-8) and walking on the pathway of our learning. Jesus says, "Jump" and you jump, and then you ask, "How high, how high should I be jumping?" You do not just *say*, "How high?" That question is already on the table in your learning effort. Instead, you do what He says and as you go you keep checking and rechecking, examining and reexamining, learning and relearning how to go in a better way, how to walk more wisely, and how to abound in loving service to Christ your Sabbath king.

From the Sermon on the Mount, we know that this loving service to Christ is powerfully relational; we serve Him in concrete ways in relation to other people, sinner and saint alike. We know that it is something different from discipleship if we sit back and observe what others are

doing and are not active ourselves (such “sitting and observing” is a judgmental accident waiting to happen). Disciples are people of action; discipleship is an active word, an active reality; it has an active core.

Matthew’s example shows us that the active core of authentic discipleship is obedience. What we have here is an example of the obedience of faith. Jesus said, “Follow me” and Matthew followed Him. Jesus says, “Repent and be baptized” and true disciples repent and receive baptism. How can you claim to be a follower without *following through*? This is a proof in the pudding thing. Jesus says, “Go and learn” so we go and learn. We do not simply go and we do not simply learn. We are learners on the go. Therefore, things unfold like this. Jesus tells us to go and study the Scriptures. If we are disciples, then that is what we will do; we will be students of the Scriptures, but that is not the end of the story. The rest of the story is that as we learn the Scriptures, we find loopholes and failures in our walk and we prayerfully correct them! That is how we find the underlying cause of things and live a healthy Christian life. It is the only way to a healthy knowledge of God in Christ, the only way to an intimate, genuine, and personal knowledge that floods the soul with the radiant light of truth.

Discipleship will involve talking. It will include talking over matters of truth with your spouse and other Christians (this is radically important!). It will include talking to God in prayer crying out for understanding, seeking it like a person seeking money, gold, and silver. However, all the talk means nothing without an obedient walk. Obedience and following (obedient-following) are at the core of discipleship that has authenticity.

2A. The Components of Authentic Discipleship

Looking at the components will help us get a closer view of the core. This is something good to do because we may be so familiar with this topic that we may miss the most important things.

We will arrive at a view of the components of authentic discipleship by beginning with inauthentic Pharisaic discipleship (of course, there is no authentic Pharisaic discipleship).

1B. Inauthentic Pharisaic discipleship

The Pharisees in this account show themselves to be complaining, formalistic, and self-righteous. We can comment on each of these things and get a view of true discipleship by inferring to the opposite because what they ought to go and learn (v. 13) shows what authentic disciples in fact go and learn. The opposite of Phariseeism reveals true religion; true interpretation of the OT in general and the Law in particular, true worship, and true obedience.

1) Complaining (v. 11)

The complaining of these religious leaders comes out in the form of a question. It is a snarling complaint that is indirect but biting. ¹¹ **And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"** The Pharisees speak to the disciples about their teacher. They are complaining against Christ but it is indirect in two ways: they talk to the disciples not to Christ (though He is present and in hearing distance) and they make their point in the form of a question. Obviously, they are not asking but saying something, namely, that Christ degrades Himself by His association with degraded people.

Thus, there is sarcasm in the question. “Your *teacher* gives the wrong lessons and is not worthy of a following. Why should you learn from *Him* and follow *Him*? What kind of religious teacher is this that teaches irreligion and ungodliness by His practice?” Theirs is not a question seeking an answer; theirs is a question making a statement (cf. how often reporters are not really asking a question, but making a statement; the media is filled to the brim with Phariseeism!). As an aside here on the Pharisees, it is amazing to hear them complain about religious inconsistency.

2) The Pharisees are complaining formalists

In their learning of the Scriptures and in their practice of what they learned, they were legalistic and formalistic. That is why they looked down upon the tax collectors and sinners. These were “people who ignored the religious decrees of the Pharisees” (Ridderbos, Matthew

182). The Pharisees thought they knew the truth and the way they practiced it became the standard that everyone else should follow; it offended them to be around degraded and degrading people. Moreover, it did not offend Christ to be around these tax gatherers and sinners; He welcomed them, spent time with them, and associated freely with them. In other words, He sat down at dinner with them.

Hearing their words to the disciples, Jesus made a comment that pointed the way to true discipleship. He said, **"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."**

Jesus quotes from the prophecy of Hosea, which has passages like 1 Sam 15.22-23 behind it. In Hosea's day, the Israelites brought sacrifices in worship to the Lord while they were living in rank disobedience. Their case was like that of king Saul in 1 Samuel 15 who disobeyed the Lord regarding the destruction of sheep so he could use those sheep in sacrifice and worship of the Lord! This is like disobeying the Lord in the way we obtain money so we can use our money to glorify God.

Jesus is saying that loving obedience to God, not formalistic and legalistic practices, is what pleases God. Moreover, the Pharisees show no mercy in either attitude or action toward sinners who are sick and in great need.

3) Pharisees are self-righteous complaining formalists

In this passage, Jesus refers to the righteous that He did not come to call. He is not telling us that there are righteous people and those are the ones that He omits from His call. Like other places in the Gospels, in view is the fact that the leaders in Israel were righteous in their own eyes. Self-righteousness is a hallmark of Phariseeism. It includes a number of elements such as comparing yourself with others with a sense of religious superiority, thinking more highly of yourself and your understanding of the Scriptures than you should, and making the law of God fit your life rather than the reverse. They were mask wearers when they looked in the mirror; they could not come to grips with their true ugliness but covered it up in deeds of the law by which they thought they attained righteousness and pleased God.

2B. Authentic Discipleship

From Matthew's good example, we already know that genuine discipleship involves going and learning, learning as you go, doing and learning. The accent here is on the doing, on following the teacher. From the Pharisees bad example, we know what to avoid, and by inferring to the opposite, we get some details about the conduct of authentic disciples.

1) By contrast to self-righteous complaining formalism, true disciples do not complain about the association of Christ with sinners. We might wrongly complain (subtly, of course, under our breath and deep in our thoughts) about how the Lord sort of winks at the clearly sinful conduct of so and so. It is as if He eats and drinks with that "so and so" and we wonder how He could do this. Instead, we should laud that association; we should be proud of the fact that our teacher eats and drinks with sinners of all kinds. Of course, He does not condone sin. He is merciful and patient. He will judge sinners both now and not yet according to larger purposes.

2) Why do disciples praise Christ for His association with sinners? Obviously, they praise Him for this because they know themselves to be sinners. They know themselves to be sin-sick sinners who need a Great Physician of the soul and Jesus is that physician who came to call sinners.

True disciples look into Scripture as learners who look into a mirror to see themselves. They do not flinch as they see the stark reality of their sins. Therefore, they acknowledge their sinfulness daily, constantly, and they seek change, growth, edification, and sanctification as something they desperately need more than anything else in this world. Learning Christ, that is their priority. They see themselves as disciple-learner-followers and Christ is their teacher. To know Him truly and fully and thus *to know themselves from that vantage point*, that is the great goal of Christians as disciples. To change, to do, and to obey that is the core of true religion for

true disciples of Christ. They do not look in the mirror with masks over their faces. They do not hate the light and hide from it (cf. Jn 3.19). They continually put themselves, their duly recognized sinful selves, under the searchlight of Scripture in order that a spotlight may shine on all the dark corners of their hearts. They do not run away from exposure in the light of truth; they submit to its exposure for healthy correction, reproof, and instruction in righteousness. We will expand on the bearing of church discipline to this exposure process later, but it is important to note that whenever two members of the church (even husband and wife) are working through some sin-issue, however small, they are in level one of church discipline described in Matthew 18. Self-discipline and church discipline at all three levels have an exposing dynamic.

How can believers face this exposure when it can be humiliating (it is radically humbling)? How can they do this when the light may be so bright that it scorches the soul of the inner man? They can face the truth candidly and humbly because of the teacher who exposes them. They know about His love, His compassion, and His kind intentions. They know that all scorching and painful exposure is for their good and His glory, even though it often comes from other people and perhaps from them in the wrong way. They can rely on it (“bank on it”) because He teaches by exposing sin and He does so to advance our greatest good.

If we walk away from exposure and self-correction, then we shoot ourselves in the feet. Then, though we are people no longer paralyzed by sin, we cripple ourselves and make walking in righteousness difficult and sometimes painful.

To be authentic disciples involves due recognition of the deceitfulness of our own hearts. Therefore, true disciples stay alert to the danger of Phariseism. Thus, true disciples read the narrative about how the Pharisees viewed sinners placing themselves outside the category of sinners, and they are self-conscious about the fact that they are looking at the Pharisees and they place themselves outside of the category of Pharisees. However, the Lord sees the truth. He knows our thoughts and the evils of our hearts. He sees the Pharisees in the category of sinners and we need to see ourselves in the category of sinners as well. Furthermore, as sinners we must admit tendencies to Phariseism in our own attitudes and actions. We must therefore fall down before the majesty of our Sabbath king in humble recognition of our sinfulness and need. We then come to worship Him with frail obedience in repentance and ever clinging to His sacrifice in our place.

In summary on this second contrast, authentic discipleship is not self-righteous. Instead, it involves sincere acknowledgement of sin in light of God’s Law (cf. Mat 5.8, pure of heart) and constant reevaluation, reexamination, and correction (doing, correcting, changing, and growing in righteousness).

3) Authentic disciples view other sinners with pity and compassion

They do not look at sinners censoriously with repugnance and disgust. When they look at sinners they remember that they are looking at other sinners (i.e. they remember that they are sinners along with others). Therefore, they show pity and compassion. They are merciful or full of mercy. They forgive as Christ forgave them. They ask for forgiveness in a way that corresponds to the forgiveness that they bestow on others (Mat 6.12, 14-15).

True disciples show mercy toward sin sick and needy sinners. Elysia’s email from Russia expresses this action of showing mercy to the needy.

There's something beautiful about simplicity. Washing my clothes by hand, living where the only space designated to me is for sleeping and storing my things, and appreciating the luxury of a hot shower, I am happy. There is no TV, there is no theater...and yet I am satisfied. In fact, I am more than satisfied. I am blessed beyond what any words can describe.

As I interact with people who don't know Christ and realize my utter failure to adequately communicate His love, I realize how wealthy I am. To have the smallest notion of what it means to be loved by God is to be blessed beyond any curse and any amount of suffering.

Slowly it becomes apparent as to which children at the camp are orphans. They wear the same clothes everyday and sometimes they are more clingy than the other children. My heart is so heavy with sadness and hope for them. It's not a rule, but orphans are shunned here. It is common to regard them as "less" than those who have not been abandoned. This is evidenced by the way they are treated (in general) and talked about. Until the age of 16 they are permitted to stay in an orphanage, where their incentive for doing school work is the promise of cigarettes and there is no one to guide them. I have been told that after 16 they are on their own. It's no wonder that some turn to drugs, prostitution, and other self-destructive paths.

I can do nothing for them except pray, give them a hug, and say "I love you". It's not enough. Nothing I could ever do, no matter how much time I had with them, could heal their wounds, redeem them, and make them whole. But there is hope because Jesus can do this. No matter what the odds, there is hope for them...

It doesn't matter what our outward circumstances are, there is hope. For if we have salvation, we have everything we need. And if we don't have salvation, we are in true poverty. Who can make this known? Certainly not me. I am a small part of a plan which is not my own. Thankfully, the real work is in God's hands. So there is hope and I am walking in that direction. I have no way of knowing exactly how my presence here has impacted anyone. What a comfort to know that it isn't up to me, to know that someone is taking care of everything that I cannot.

The gospel is preached in various ways several times a day. I want nothing more than to see people change by accepting Christ and acknowledging their need for Him. Please pray for us.

Conclusion: The Pattern of Discipleship

Jesus said, "Follow me." Jesus is the pattern of our following. To follow through in our learning commitment means that we follow Him in deed and word. He gave us an example that we may follow in His footsteps. He gave us His word for us to go to, to hear, talk about, and learn in order to do the will of our Father in heaven in a way that follows the pattern set for us by the Lord Jesus. His food was to do the will of God who sent Him. Now He tells us to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Thus, as disciple-learner-followers, we actively seek to learn from Him and obey Him. Here in active discipleship, the Sermon on the Mount comes alive in our walking about in freedom from the paralyzing effects of sin.

Thus, to be a Christian is to be Christ-like. In a word that means that true discipleship under Christ involves following Christ in a life of compassionate righteousness with a repentant heart (repentance is here because His example exposes our sins). Still, we follow without flinching because the one who knows our sins is the one who forgives them. Moreover, He forgives them by sacrifice, by the sacrifice of Himself in our place. He showed us mercy first before He tells us to go and show mercy. This is amazing grace; by grace, God calls sinners out of darkness and into the marvelous light of the gospel.