

The Grain of Wheat

Matt. 16:24-28

Introduction

Review Last Week

1. In this series of teaching about being disciples of Jesus Christ, the following things are essential:
 - a) Jesus calls disciples into a direct relationship with Him for the rest of our lives.
 - b) Jesus taught that if anyone wants to be a disciple, there are 3 things they must do every day: deny self; take up their cross; and follow Him.
 - c) We have been learning to the sacrifice of our will; mind; and the heart.
2. We learnt from Peter that following Jesus as a learner that is becoming like Jesus, meant that his heart motivation was to be God's special kind of love. Denying self means the sacrifice of the heart. This is the most difficult sacrifice to make, but it is the most important.

The Proposition this Week:

"The new life lies beyond the cross with its suffering and sacrifice."

Learning as Disciples

The Parables of Jesus

Jesus often spoke in parables, and He did this for some very specific reasons.¹ The disciples had the privilege of asking Jesus to explain them. The same applies to us as "learner-followers" of Jesus, except that we have the help of the Holy Spirit in the following 2 ways:

1. The Holy Spirit works to illuminate the truth (i.e. to give insight and understanding of the truth).²
2. The Holy Spirit works to remind us of what Jesus taught.³

The Process of Learning

As human beings, we learn in specific ways and there are some principles that help us to learn effectively. The Bible gives some of the more important principles of learning to us, such as taking truth into our hearts, and applying

¹ Mark 4:1-13,33-34; Matt. 13:10-17,34-36ff.

² John 14:16-17; 16:7-16; 1 Cor. 2:9-16

³ John 14:26; Act. 11:16

the truth that we understand in our lives by obedience.⁴ The following 2 principles are especially pertinent to learning as disciples:

1. Read, Reflect, Apply – this means that we first need to receive (take in) the Word of God into our minds and hearts. Then we must think about it (to meditate on it by turn it over or around repeatedly) until it becomes part of our thinking. Then we must apply it or practice it daily. Only after that can we say that we have learned it and that we are walking in it (i.e. living it).
2. Summary and Repetition – this means that we need to be able to put what is said into a short statement of our own words so that we can recall and repeat it again and again.

The Key Truth in Jesus' Teaching

Matt. 16:24

When Jesus called people to be His disciples, He challenged them and some failed to meet what Jesus expected of them. So after His identity as “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus clearly stated the 3 key truths that constitute being a disciple. To be a disciple of Jesus, you must:

1. Deny your “self”

This is not a popular message among most Christians today because preachers have fed us a steady diet of truth applied in self-indulgent ways and self-legitimization that have produced a barren, powerless church. They imply that believing in following Jesus is just about being entertained and “happy.” But there is more to it than mere self-actualization. In fact Jesus is saying that the way to life is to lose the selfishness that dominates us.

Denying self simply means to say “No!” to that part of our beings (the sinful nature) that always wants to assert itself and demands satisfaction. It is saying no to the soul’s wishes, demands, desires, and rights. It does not mean the rejection of self, but rather the submission of self to the will of God. As long as we give in to our souls to be ruled by it, we cannot follow Jesus, we cannot be His disciple, and we cannot serve Him fruitfully.

Being a disciple of Jesus is never about what I want, think, or feel. It is about acquiescing to what He wants, thinks, or feels. Without denying self every day it will soon be impossible to live an authentic Christian life or to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Matt. 13:3ff; Jam. 1:21-27; 1 Thess. 2:13

2. Take up your cross

The second step in the process is often a “chilling” one because of what it meant to carry a cross in the days of Jesus. It did not mean wearing a little cross around your neck or on your lapel, as a piece of jewellery and it did not mean walking around with a replica of the cross on your shoulder. The cross was an instrument of torture; suffering and it always resulted in the death of the one carrying it.

The cross of Christ was the means of His suffering and death. Although He was innocent, Jesus died as a criminal on a Roman cross. On the 3rd day, He rose from the dead, never to die again. His crucifixion was an enigma until the disciples realized that His death was a sacrifice for the sins of the world. It was their preaching on Christ crucified that turned the world upside down. This was because the very idea of a crucified Messiah was offensive to the Jew and foolish to the Greek.⁵ Consequently, to carry one’s cross daily is not simply to endure some hardship or difficulty regardless of the pain involved, but it refers to dying to self. It is important to emphasize the fact that the taking up of one’s cross is a voluntary act and an offering or sacrifice to God.⁶

3. Follow Jesus

Following Jesus describes the life of the disciple in its conformity to Jesus. We are disciples in that we learn from Jesus’ Words and Works. We are becoming like Jesus in life and service. This is the new life, the new adventure of the disciple.

The Parable of the Grain of Wheat

John 12:20-26

The Background

Jesus had come to end of His earthly life and ministry. He knew that only the cross and the grave lay ahead of Him, but He didn’t know when it would occur. Then something happened, something that showed Him that the time had arrived. There were many wonderful things that took place, but they were not the signal. Lazarus had died and been raised to life again – but that wasn’t it. Mary anointed Jesus with expensive oil, but that wasn’t it. Then some Greeks at the feast in Jerusalem were insisting to have an interview with Jesus. When Jesus heard that He reacted – probably to everyone’s surprise. He said that the specific time had arrived for Him to be glorified.

⁵ 1 Cor. 1:17-29

⁶ John 10:17-18

Why was their insistent inquiry the significant sign? I believe it was because it showed that the time was ripe for the salvation of the world, so Jesus would die on the cross, but it would have really great results. As a grain of wheat, He would fall “into the earth”⁷ and die. Then it would result in “much fruit.” This was the great task that Jesus had been sent to accomplish. It was His mission to save all who believe in Him by his death and resurrection. Jesus was missional.

The Teaching

Jesus described 2 scenarios regarding the grain. He said either:

1. The grain falls into the earth and dies – but then it becomes fruitful.
2. Or it stays (i.e. continues) the same – but then it doesn't produce or do anything.

There is no other option for the Christian who wants to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Either we deny our self, take up our cross and follow Jesus in a direct and dynamic relationship for the rest of our lives or we just stay as we are – stuck in the same old life.

Now there is also a price and a process involved in this experience. The price can be seen by some as a somewhat negative experience. However, depending on one's perspective this is not necessarily so. Some think of the death of the old life as a sad loss, while others think of it as a wonderful release from what was essentially the experience of getting rid of something bad and burdensome.

In any event the grain must fall down into the earth and die before anything great emerges. It has to be lost or buried in the soil. Jesus had to die and His wonderful earthly life had to come to an end as a sacrifice for the sins of the world before we could be saved. Jesus was willing to lay His life down and to give it up on the cross.⁸

The next key thing was the growth process. For a grain of wheat to produce something, and for new life to come from it, it had to decay and rot. The husk had to soften and disintegrate in the moist soil of the earth. Then followed a process called germination where growth and development takes place – there is the bud, the roots and eventually the seed-bearing plant with many more grains of wheat.

The Application

Jesus clarified the paradox⁹ of His teaching by presenting one of two options:

⁷ John 12:24

⁸ Luke 23:46

⁹ A paradox is a statement, proposition, or situation that seems to be absurd or contradictory, but in fact is or may be true. It is a statement that contradicts itself because it states 2 opposite truths.

1. If on the one hand, you (try to preserve) your life, you will lose it. I have seen this happen many times in the lives of people. They try to “save” their marriage by keeping their spouses to themselves, only to lose that spouse to the world.
2. But on the other hand, if you lose or hate¹⁰ your life in this world, you will preserve or guard it for eternal life.

Finally, Jesus stated a principle with a wonderful promise. If anyone wants to serve or minister, they must become a disciple – a learner-follower of Jesus Christ. There are no shortcuts here – every minister must be a disciple first. Every leader must first be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Then there follows the promise of His presence and honour. We desperately need the presence of God in our hearts, homes and ministry.

Conclusion

The Bridge in the Discipleship Process:

The bridge that spans the gap between our old lives and bearing fruit¹¹ is the truth of this parable: lose this life to gain the next.

Application Questions

1. Why must the “old life” first die before we can experience the “new” while we live on earth?
2. How can you apply the teaching in this parable to yourself personally and practically?
3. How do you “receive” God’s word into your heart, mind and soul?
4. What one thing does God want you to take from today?

¹⁰ The Greek word used here is: *miseo*, which means to detest (especially to persecute) and by extension to love less. It implies a definite choice to place one above or instead of another.

¹¹ John 15:1ff