

Some Characteristics of Discipleship

John 21:15-23

Introduction:

1. We are now in Week 2 of “Am I a Disciple?” How many of you are finding that title a bit challenging? I suspect that we are more comfortable with flipping the two first words around and saying “I am a disciple” because we assume it to be true.
2. Probably most of us who have been in the church for any time have assumed that we are disciples. We have prayed the sinners prayer, we attend church, on any given week we kept at least 8 of the 10 commandments, and the ones we broke were more in the coveting sphere than murder or adultery.
3. This question, as we have been discovering indicates that there is something more. As we ask the question, some of our assumptions about ourselves are brought to light. For instance, last week, I discovered that I possibly was not as teachable as I thought I was. I mentioned this to my wife, and the look on her face indicated that possibly this was less of a revelation for her than it was for me. The problem is that now that I know it, I need to do something about it. This illustrates that all of us have room to grow, and we are not as mature as we like to think that we are.
4. Am I a disciple is a good question to be asking ourselves on an ongoing basis, if we do this with the proper point of view. The question is not intended to raise self-doubt, cause us to question our salvation, or lead to discouragement. The question though, does cause us not to take things for granted, not to lose focus, and to realize that even though we are complete in Christ, we are not finished products yet.
5. In our exploration of discipleship, we have touched on events in the life of Peter. Peter probably provides us with the most subject matter of any of the disciples. In some ways, he is also the most endearing of the disciples. He was brash, impetuous, not very subtle, yet with a big heart. He was probably the first ever “big loveable lug” as often appears in literature and entertainment.
6. Today we will be looking at one of the most heart-wrenching, yet heart-warming events in the life of Peter.
7. Let us set the stage first. Jesus has been crucified and has risen again. He has appeared to the disciples twice in an upper room. Sometime later, Peter and six other disciples went fishing. They fish all night and catch nothing. Early in the morning a figure from the shore calls out to them, asking how they have done. When they answer that they had caught nothing, they are told to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. Immediately, there is a huge catch of fish, and John says to Peter, “it is the Lord”.
8. I don’t know what it is about Peter and boats when he sees Jesus, but immediately he jumps overboard while the others haul in the catch. He rejoins them in the boat, they bring in the catch and enjoy a meal with Jesus.

9. It is in this context that Jesus and Peter have the little heart to heart that we are going to look at today
10. Read John 21:15-23
11. This week's study guide is entitled "Character: Am I a Follower"? Character comes in large measure from characteristics and in this account, we will see at least five characteristics of discipleship.
12. Transition: The first characteristic is that

I. Discipleship is a Relationship With a Person, Not Commitment to a Creed

1. This conversation between Jesus and Peter is deeply personal
2. It is even quite raw in places
3. Think about the time in your life when you felt the most guilt and shame having to face somebody. I suspect that it pales in comparison with what Peter was feeling
4. Peter had boasted that he would stay with Jesus, no matter what, but when crisis hit he denied even knowing Jesus.
5. From his point of view at least, the relationship was broken
6. Quite possibly this was his first time one on one with Jesus, so there may be some apprehension and fear involved
7. I tend to wonder if when Peter saw Jesus, he was tempted to jump off the other side of the boat and swim in the opposite direction. We know that Adam and Eve chose to hide rather than face God. Was Peter facing the same temptation understanding what he had done? Peter broke one of the Ten Commandments when he denied Jesus in bearing false witness. It doesn't appear that he was concerned about having broken some rule, he was worried that he had broken a relationship
8. One of the questions we can ask ourself is "Am I committed to Jesus, or merely committed to His teaching?" There is a subtle difference between a devotee and a disciple. A devotee can be devoted to a person, thing, or teaching, a disciple is committed to a person. Sometimes, we may settle for merely being devotees, and that is a problem.
9. Most of the religious leaders of that day were at best devotees to their understanding of the Law. That hindered them from recognizing Jesus and becoming disciples.
10. Building on that relationship, a second characteristic of discipleship is that

II. Discipleship Requires Restoration to Jesus

1. Peter at best had a damaged relationship with Jesus, at the very worst it was damaged beyond repair
2. As previously mentioned, Peter had boasted that though others turned away, he would not. However, when he had the chance to be identified with Jesus, he denied him, not once, not twice, but three times. What is worse, Jesus had told him that he would do this, so he should have been on his guard, but it still happened.

3. How could he ever look Jesus in the eye? I wonder if he was expecting Jesus to turn his words back on him and say "I never knew the man".
4. Notice how Jesus is the one who initiates the conversation that led to the restoration.
5. Peter could not make things right on his own. Jesus had to take the initiative. The same is true with us. We think that we are trying to be reconciled to Jesus, but we need to recognize that He is the one who takes the initiative here. It is by his love, mercy and grace that we can be restored.
6. Each of us have denied Jesus in some way, either actively or passively. We are in a world which is estranged from Jesus, and we share that estrangement. In that context, Jesus takes the initiative for us to be restored. Do we respond? If so, how?
7. In this characteristic, our "Am I a disciple?" question is "Have I been restored to Jesus?" Jesus has taken the initiative in providing us reconciliation. He is the one seeking us, though we think it is the other way around. Have we received the reconciliation that has been offered to us? How do we respond to his call?
8. Having looked at the context of the conversation, as we now look at the content we see that

III. Discipleship is Not an Easy Path

1. Quite frankly this one is hard. We don't want a difficult path, we want it to be smooth and easy. We are conditioned to look for ease, comfort, convenience.
2. Discipleship is rarely, if ever easy, comfortable, or convenient. It certainly wasn't for Peter here.
3. Jesus could have said to Peter "Peter, remember how you denied me three times. No big deal, don't worry about it". I think that is sometimes how we hope that our sin will be viewed.
4. The fact is that it was a big deal, and Peter would not experience full freedom from its guilt unless he worked it through
5. Jesus asked Peter 3 times, "Do you love me?"
 - a. I don't know if there was deliberate significance on the part of Jesus to have one declaration of love match each denial. Over the years, many people, including me have called this out. The fact is, it possibly doesn't matter, even though it helps people like me who like symmetry
 - b. Consider for a moment what we know about Peter. Peter was really quick to answer, sometimes seemingly without thinking. I wonder if this is one of the reasons why Jesus persisted with Peter. Peter needed to truly own his declaration of love to Jesus and for it not to be a quick statement that he had not thought through.
 - c. It is almost as though Jesus was saying "Are you sure you love me?" "Are you really sure you love me?" "Last chance, no turning back now."
 - d. Jesus did not make it easy for Peter. He did not cheapen the forgiveness and restoration. We want it quick and easy. It is free, but not always easy.
6. Have you ever had the situation where something stands out in a passage that you have read a number of times? For me this time it is the phrase "Peter was hurt". I am wondering if hurt is a requirement in true discipleship
7. One of the passages in our guide this week was Matthew 19:16-22

8. The rich young ruler was devoted to the teaching. He was interested in following. However, when told to sell his possessions, we read “When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth”
9. He was willing to follow up to the point where it hurt, then he backed away.
10. Look at what Jesus says in vs. 18. Peter does not have an easy path before him, and Jesus finishes that with “Follow me”.
11. Jesus described discipleship as laying down our lives. That hurts.
12. Our obvious question then is, “Is my commitment to Jesus stronger than the hurt required by that commitment?”
13. Moving on, looking at the instructions Jesus gave to Peter in the conversation we see that

IV. Discipleship is Acted Out Amongst Others

1. Feed my lambs
2. Take care of my sheep
3. Feed my sheep
4. Likely Peter wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of his life one on one with Jesus
 - a. He had likely never felt so loved and accepted in his life, but, he did not get to stay there, or bask in that forever
 - b. His love of Jesus had an implication
5. I am not going to drill down deeply into the distinction between sheep and lambs and feeding and tending, apart from to say that it implies adapting to the situation that you find yourself in
 - a. Some people are not very self-sufficient and need more specific care
 - b. Others just require some guidance along the way
6. Do you get the point? Discipleship is not a program, it is a lifestyle and an expression of who we are. We can feed in a variety of ways from physical food, to encouragement, to teaching, to prayer, even to correction. We can look after by lending a hand, lending an ear, praying, advocating, advising, giving, instructing, protecting, confronting. What has been done in us is meant to be shared with others. Living this Christian life is not something to be held back. It is not a private thing between us and Jesus. It is meant to be freely given to others, and by doing so, we equip them also to live this Christian life of reconciliation, not giving up when it hurts, and not isolating ourselves.
7. Notice also that Jesus uses the phrase “My” to describe sheep and lambs
 - a. Read Matthew 25:40
 - b. We literally love Jesus by loving others
8. Self-examination question here “Do I want to share what I have with others?”
9. This passage closes with an interesting little segment. Read John 21:20-23. Here we see the fifth characteristic

V. Discipleship Does Not Look the Same for Everybody

1. Peter, while an example of discipleship is not the boilerplate for discipleship
2. He has a sense of what his path will look like, so he asks about one of his friends
3. Notice Jesus' answer "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me".
4. The discipleship experience of John will not be the same as that for Peter. If we read ahead in Acts, we see that James was killed early on, while Peter was delivered from prison. Peter even brought along his wife in his ministry (1 Corinthians 9:5). All disciples, but different paths.
5. One of the traps that we can fall into is comparing ourselves to other believers that we respect. We try to follow the details of the example they set rather than the principles leading to the details of the example they set. It does me no good to try to be Mike when I am called to be Steve, but I can be challenged by Mike's level of passion, though I might express it differently.
6. A week or two ago, Mike shared that years ago he took a personality profile to match to a Biblical personality, and he matched with Peter. Guess what, I would not match with Peter. If you know me, impetuous is not a word that you would use to describe me. In fact, it has been said that I plan my spontaneity.
7. In looking at the disciples, I suspect that I would match most closely with Thomas. I tend to think things through and don't come to quick decisions. I call him the empirical disciple. Peter jumped out of the boat, Thomas stayed on board to haul in the fish. Thomas was corrected by Jesus for overthinking, that certainly was not the issue with Peter.
8. Possibly some of you are like John, having a lot of self-confidence and feeling really close to Jesus.
9. Maybe you are completely transparent like Nathaniel, a person without guile.
10. Likely some of you are like Andrew, Peter's brother who does not get the same level of recognition as a family member, but doesn't let it be a hinderance.
11. Possibly a lot of us are like Thaddeus. Thaddeus, you might say. What did he ever do? Precisely. He did not call attention to himself, but faithfully served out of the limelight, yet was one of Jesus' closest followers. God uses His less obvious disciples as much as his more obvious ones.
12. Question, "How is God calling me to be a disciple?"

Conclusion:

1. That is the crux, God is calling us to be disciples. Jesus is saying to us "Follow me".
2. In fact, you may say that is the sixth characteristic as it is underlying all the others. A disciple is one who has agreed to the call of Jesus to "Follow me".
3. Jesus is not looking for followers in the Twitter sense of the word where you follow because the person is a celebrity or because you are curious, or because you are interested in what they are going to say next, though Jesus had those as well. Funny thing, just like with Twitter, Jesus said something a little too outrageous, and people stopped following.

4. Read John 21:18-19. How is that for a recruiting slogan? You are going to die a martyr's death, come follow me.
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was quoted as saying "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die".
6. Matthew 16:24
Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
7. What do we do about that? It doesn't seem like ease, comfort, and convenience
8. Peter is both an encouragement and a challenge for us. For all of his failings and brokenness he is possibly the most beloved of all of the disciples. He reminds us that there is hope for each of us in our own failings and our own brokenness.
9. So, Am I a disciple? Some days we can answer that more heartily than others. If you can heartily say "Yes", good for you, keep at it. If, however, you are challenged, don't give up. The answer is not meant to paralyze us, it should motivate us. As such it is a good healthy question to keep asking because it takes a lifetime to be fully answered.