

The Challenge of Discipleship

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Introduction

Few English nouns appear with greater frequency in the New Testament than the word *disciple* (269 times in the ASV). By far the preponderance of appearances are found in the four Gospel accounts. This term is used frequently in these books to describe the men and women who, in increasing numbers, were attracted to the Lord by His teaching and His miraculous activity. They believed Him to be the Messiah and even followed Him about. Sometimes even those whose loyalty to the Christ was rather shallow are called “disciples.” Of the many such broad usages of the term, the following are illustrative:

1. Mark 2:15 said of His disciples: “for there were many, and they followed him.”¹
2. Luke wrote of “a great number of his disciples” (6:17).
3. John described one occasion in which “...many of his disciples went back and walked no more with him” (6:66).

From this larger pool of disciples, Jesus chose twelve men, whom He designated “apostles”: “And when it was day, he called his disciples; and he chose from them twelve, whom also he named apostles” (Luke 6:13; cf. Mat. 10:1-2). Although these twelve men, from the moment of their appointment, held a special relationship to the Lord, were given a special work to do, and were given special powers through which to operate (Mat. 10:5-42), they were still frequently described as “disciples” — often as “the disciples.” Matthew wrote that immediately after the appointment of these men, “And it came to pass when Jesus had finished commanding his twelve disciples, he departed thence to teach and preach in their cities” (11:1; cf. 26:20; et al.). Matthew referred to Peter, James, and John — all apostles — as “the disciples” at the Transfiguration (17:1, 6). After Judas defected, Matthew described the balance of the apostles as “the eleven disciples” (28:16). We may therefore summarize the relationship between the words *disciple* and *apostle* by saying that all of the apostles were disciples, but certainly not all of the disciples were apostles.

Comparatively, *disciple* appears only a scant number of times after John’s Gospel account. In fact, all (28) of its occurrences thereafter are in the book of Acts, after which it disappears from the New Testament text. The Lord indicated in the great commission those to whom *disciple* would apply after the apostles began to preach the Gospel, beginning on Pentecost: “Go ye therefore, and make **disciples** of all the nations, baptizing them...” (Mat.

28:19, emph. DM). It is apparent from His words that those who heard, believed, and obeyed the Gospel, eventuating in their baptism unto salvation (Mark. 16:15–16), would thereby become “disciples.”²

When the apostles began to execute the great commission on Pentecost, penitent believers were baptized unto the remission of sins and were added to the church (Acts 2:36:41, 47). Luke described the continuation of this activity, with the consequent enlargement of the church, as “...the number of the **disciples** was multiplying” (Acts 6:1, 7, emph. DM). He reported the reign of terror Saul of Tarsus unleashed upon the followers of Christ as “...Saul,...breathing threatening and slaughter against the **disciples** of the Lord...” (9:1, emph. DM). However, when he first alluded to this campaign of suffering he called depicted it as “...a great persecution against **the church**...” (8:1, emph. DM). It is apparent that the “disciples” constituted those who were in the church and none else—the two terms are not synonymous, but they are obviously used interchangeably. The word *Christian* is also used to coincide with *disciple* a bit later: “The **disciples** were called **Christians** first in Antioch” (11:26, emph. DM). Thus since the Pentecost following the Lord’s death, one begins his discipleship upon obeying the Gospel plan of salvation, whereby he becomes a Christian and is added to the church.

The Son of God issued many challenges and invitations to men to become His disciples. Perhaps none is more comprehensive and challenging in so few words than the following, recorded by Luke:

And he said unto all, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. (Luke 9:23-24).

Although the word *disciple* is not in this passage, it is clear that Jesus aims these words at both “would-be” and professed adherents. The parallel accounts are helpful in this regard. Matthew prefaced this same challenge as follows: “Then said Jesus unto his disciples...” (16:24). This fact indicates that He wanted those who were **already following** Him to know fully the rigorous demands of discipleship. Additionally, Mark indicates that Jesus’ audience for these words was mixed. Some were disciples while others apparently were prospective ones: “And he called unto him the multitude with his disciples...” (Mark 8:34). I conclude that this challenge sets forth in principle the ultimate requirements both for those who are contemplating becoming disciples of Jesus and the requirements for remaining faithful to Him, once one becomes a disciple.

The reader should notice that these requirements as stated by Luke are not for any one class of people (e.g., elders, preachers, deacons, Bible class teachers, etc.). Luke says that Jesus laid down these requirements “to all” and then He applied his words to “any man” (from the neuter indefinite pronoun, *tis*, lit., “anyone,” i.e., man or woman) (Luke 9:23). As we study this context let us all measure our own quality of discipleship by the Lord’s standards, particularly those set forth in Verse 23.

A Disciple Is One Who Diligently Learns the Teachings of Another

W.E. Vine says that the Greek word, *mathetes* (from which *disciple* is translated), literally means “...a learner (from *manthano*, to learn, from a root *math* – indicating thought accompanied by endeavour)....”³ Thayer agrees, giving “a learner, pupil, disciple” as the meaning of *mathetes*,⁴ as do Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich.⁵ We thus readily see that discipleship begins with study, learning, and becoming a student of the teachings of another person, then proceeds to acceptance of the things learned and to following them.

Moreover, the *disciple* implies somewhat of an earnest and serious – as opposed to a casual or nonchalant – attitude in the learner or student. Suppose one became interested in the sixteenth-century Reformer, Martin Luther – one of the giants of the Reformation. Suppose further that, upon reading a smattering of material about Luther and his doctrine, one decided he wanted to become his disciple. I question that he could actually and fully do so without earnest, diligent, thorough study of Luther’s teaching. One could hardly be in a position to know whether or not he could even agree with some of the major points of Luther’s doctrine – much less all of it – before or without such diligent study. One might admire some things about Luther and claim to be (or even think he is) his disciple, but he is no real disciple/follower of the man apart from a thorough knowledge of what he taught. Indeed, some sincere souls who once thought they were disciples of Luther, upon studying his doctrine fully in light of the Bible, have thereby realized that they were not such at all.

Likewise, the elementary, beginning point of becoming (and remaining) a disciple of Jesus is being an earnest, avid student of His life and teachings. Sadly, many of those who claim to be His disciples belie the claim because they have little knowledge of the Master’s Word and little ambition to learn more of it. It appears that it would take power beyond that of a nuclear bomb to get some to study the Bible seriously. They are able-bodied and claim to be Jesus’ “disciples,” but one waits in vain to see them in a Bible class on Sunday morning or Wednesday

evening, or attending every meeting of a Gospel meeting series or Bible lectureship conducted by their home congregation (much less one anywhere else). One can hardly expect that such ones are spending any time each day even reading, much less earnestly studying, at home. Yet, they want to be called “disciples.” Such do not even measure up to the very beginning point of the definition of *discipleship*. One who is sincere about being a disciple of Jesus will hunger and thirst for righteousness (Mat. 5:6) and will delight in and meditate on the law of the Lord day and night (Psa. 1:2).

There is more, however, to being a disciple than merely filling one’s head with knowledge. One might so study as to become an authority on the doctrine of Martin Luther and might even teach what he has learned to others—and still not be Luther’s disciple. Likewise, one might earn a PhD in the life and teachings of Christ and be recognized thereby as an authority in those subjects. However, this in itself would not make him a disciple of Jesus. Proof of this contention is the fact that there are likely thousands of men who have earned advanced degrees in Christological studies and who are teaching in seminaries and theological schools, yet they are not disciples. In fact, many of them qualify as agnostics at best and infidels at worst, doubting, if not outright denying, every fundamental Bible teaching about the Lord (e.g., His eternal pre-existence, His incarnation through His conception and birth by a virgin [and thus His Deity], His miracles, the atoning power of His blood, and His resurrection). As essential as it is, there is certainly far more to being a disciple of Jesus than vast knowledge of His life and teachings. I now direct the reader to Luke 9:23 to learn what more is involved.

A Disciple Is One Who Follows Another

Jesus said, “If any man would come after me...let him...follow me.” Thus Vine⁶ and Thayer⁷ both indicate that *mathetes* denotes not only a learner, student, or pupil, but “one who follows one’s teaching.” Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich use *adherent* to define this fuller implication of *disciple*.⁸ Thus to be a disciple of Jesus necessarily involves faithfully following the One whose teaching we have studied and learned.

Being a disciple of—following—Jesus involves two elements:

1. **First**, we must follow the **example** of the life He lived, as John wrote: “He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also to walk even as he walked” (1 John 2:6). It is apparent from this statement that one who claims to be a disciple of Jesus is obligated to live as He lived. We must not only “talk the talk”; we also must “walk the walk.” Failure of a dedicated effort to do so exposes one as a hypocrite. When one thinks of God’s Son, His

sinless, pristine-pure life comes to mind (Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 1:19; et al.). He was filled with love, both for God (John 14:31) and mankind (Eph. 5:2). He was the consummate unselfish servant (Phi. 2:7). He was a man of ceaseless toil (John 9:4), of prayer (Luke 6:12), and of compassion (Mat. 9:36). He completely submitted His own will to the Father's will (John 6:38). He boldly refuted false doctrine and publicly exposed and marked those who taught it (Mat. 15:1-14; 23:1-36). He respected Scripture and identified it as the Word of God (Mat. 5:17-19; John 10:35; 17:17; et al.). He exhibited great courage and serenity under the most severe duress, opposition, and suffering (John 18:1-14, 19-24, 28-40; 19:1-18).

2. **Second**, following Jesus involves following—**obeying**—His Word, His teachings. Notice this emphasis from Him: “Jesus therefore said to those Jews that had believed in him, if ye **abide in my word**, then are ye **truly my disciples**” (John 8:31, emph. DM). Thus one is a “disciple” in name alone, but not in actuality, if he does not adhere to the teachings of Christ; as **becoming** true disciples is conditional, so is **remaining** true disciples. In fact, Jesus warns that if one rejects the things He says (i.e., His teachings, His Word), he has rejected Christ Himself: “He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my sayings, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I spake, the same shall judge him in the last day” (12:48). Again, genuine discipleship is inseparable from careful adherence to the teachings of Christ.

By this two-fold test, it is obvious that some want to be called “disciples” who fail the conditions the Lord Himself specified. Many “wanna-be disciples” do not “wanna-be” encumbered with living the way the Christ lived. Instead of serving God and others they think only of being served. In my many years of work as a preacher in various congregations I have experienced the following (or something similar) more than once: I would receive word that a brother or sister was in the hospital. Upon going there to visit I would be met with a hostile and accusing attitude: “Where have you been? Don’t you care anything about me? Why did it take you so long to get here?” In every such case the person with this attitude was someone who had not thought of visiting anyone in the hospital for the past twenty years. He or she was consumed with selfishness, never thinking of serving others.

A pretend “disciple” knows nothing of steadfastness or faithfulness under opposition’s fire, but like the “rocky soil” of Jesus’ parable, produces but a weak and sickly sprout that soon withers and compromises “...when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word” (Mat. 13:21). Many are they who have boundless energy for all sorts of activities except those that pertain to their eternal destiny, yet they parade as “disciples.” Many who live immoral lives still want to be viewed as disciples of the pure Christ. Such “disciples” would never follow His example and expose a false doctrine or a false teacher (if they could recognize one), and they do

not want anyone else to do so either. Prayer is all but unknown in their lives except when they are in a church building, but they still want to be known as “disciples.”

Some do not want to follow His teachings any more than they do His example. It is evident that many have followed Jesus’ teachings far enough that they were baptized and became His disciples, but they rebel at the idea of going much further. Oh, they will follow as long as they agree with and like the truths Jesus uttered and as long as said truths do not condemn their behavior and make them feel guilty. It is little short of amazing that some will join hands with the world in drinking, dancing, gambling, disrobing in public, and even living in open adultery, and still piously argue that they are disciples of Christ. Some cease being disciples when He teaches us to give our money faithfully and generously for His blood-bought church, others when He decrees that fornication is the only God-authorized cause for divorce and remarriage. Many turn aside from the Lord’s doctrine when the congregation follows His orders to withdraw from the impenitent disorderly. Such namby-pamby specimens of “discipleship” not only do not want to do what the Lord teaches in this respect themselves, but they will also stop the church from doing it if they can.

A genuine, true disciple – by the Lord’s own declaration – is one who abides in His Word. The real disciple is one who follows his Master without reservation or pre-condition. He has such faith in and devotion to his Lord that he follows wherever, whenever, and in whatever He leads. “If any man will come after me... let him...follow me.”

A Disciple Is One Who Denies Himself

Jesus’ next requirement of discipleship is, “Let him deny himself.” What does this mean? Does this refer to the concept of “Lent” as practiced by denominationalism, (both Catholic and Protestant) during which people are encouraged to give up a vice or a convenience or to fast in the forty-day period leading up to “Easter”? Hardly so. Does it refer to withholding from ourselves certain things we would like to have (buying a two-bedroom house instead of one with three bedrooms, a \$20,000.00 car instead of one that cost \$30,000.00, a hamburger instead of a steak dinner, et al.)? Not really, although denying self might in some cases find a practical application in some such ways. That which Jesus sets before us here is not merely denying ourselves some **things** but denying **self** – period.

In order to understand what the Lord means by denial of self, we must understand the meaning of the word *deny*. A look at another passage in which this same word appears is

helpful. At Jesus' mock trial in Caiaphas' house, Peter was accused of being one of His disciples. Luke says, "But he denied, saying, Woman, I know him not" (Luke 22:57; cf. vv. 34, 61). The Greek word *arneomai* is rendered "deny" in Verse 57. It means "to deny by way of disowning a person,"⁹ and is "...used of followers of Jesus who, for fear of death or persecution, deny that Jesus is their master, and desert his cause [to disown]."¹⁰ Clearly, Peter disowned Christ as he said, "I know him not." The Lord used an intensified form of *arneomai* (*aparneomai*) in Luke 9:23 concerning the self-denial He demands of us. It carries the significance of: "Let him **utterly** deny himself." What Peter said concerning Christ—"I know him not"—I must say of myself, only more intensely. Thayer's comment on this phrase gets to the heart of the Lord's requirement: "To forget one's self, lose sight of one's self and one's own interests."¹¹

The Lord then is not aiming merely at some sinful habit or at some portion of our lives in this challenge. Rather, He challenges us to dethrone self with all of its self-pleasing desires that center in this world and that cater to our conveniences, our pleasures, and to our own selfish wills. We are to begin and continue a life of unquestioned and unquestioning obedience to Christ, Who alone can lead us to glory at last. In the act of repentance, we are so to change our minds that we despise sin and love righteousness; we are then to change our lives so as to "do works worthy of repentance" (Acts 2:38; 26:20; cf. Mat. 3:8). In a life of persistent repentance alone can we continually deny self. Paul wrote a powerful commentary on what Jesus meant when He said, "Deny self": "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2:20a).

The kingdom of Heaven is in the throes of vicious attacks from fifth columnists—citizens guilty of religious high treason who have defected to the enemy but who still remain among us. They have caused (and continue to cause) appalling damage to the onward march of the army of the Lord. Many entire congregations have stacked arms and surrendered to these apostates, and many others have suffered confusion and outright division because of their evil works. Such divisions, though temporarily devastating, must come when obligatory issues of Truth and righteousness are at stake (Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 11:19; 2 John 7-11; et al.).

However, countless congregations of the Lord's people, beginning in apostolic times, have been seriously disturbed and/or divided over matters that have nothing to do with obligatory doctrinal matters at all. Rather, these matters sprout from utter selfishness in one or more members of the church who are determined to "rule or ruin." Sometimes they create great havoc even when they are not allowed to rule. Their "weighty contention" may be nothing

more than the color of new carpet or the hour the church will assemble. The “issue” is not really “the issue”; domination and control—naked selfishness on display—is their game. “Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence” is the arch-type of every saint possessed by the demon of selfishness (3 John 9). Whether such is a preacher, an elder, a deacon, a wife of one of the aforementioned, a Bible class teacher, a person of wealth, a politician, or whoever—he or she dare not be allowed to pursue his or her dominating, dictatorial designs in the church. If a child of God will not practice denial of self, then the church is charged with helping such a disorderly one to do so (2 The. 3:6). If one does not learn to deny self, he will always be controlled by selfishness. There is no category of sin (except one of ignorance) but that it originates in selfishness and the seeking of some selfish advantage. Why then should we wonder at the teaching of our Master in this respect? True discipleship requires that one utterly disown and deny self—a lifetime work for all.

A Disciple Is One Who Suffers for His Master

Jesus said, “Let him...take up his cross....” In a similar statement the Master later said, “Whosoever doth not bear his own cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27). Obviously, bearing one’s own “cross” is innate to faithful discipleship. What is this “cross” that a disciple must bear?

Though not stated, when Jesus said that in order to follow Him a disciple must bear his own cross, He, by implication, called attention to the literal cross He would all-too-soon be called upon to bear and mount. He thus made His literal cross—the instrument of His own suffering and sacrificial death—a graphic symbol of the suffering and sacrifice His disciples will experience. As He literally bore His cross on His own back (John 19:17), so a disciple must be willing to “bear a cross” of some sort.

From the fact that the cross of Jesus signifies His sufferings, I conclude that the cross His disciples must bear also relates to sufferings. Does the Lord mean that we must fashion or purchase a literal cross of wood and bear it about? Some misguided zealots have thus literalized Jesus’ words and have inflicted unnecessary pain and suffering upon themselves by such behavior. Certainly, there is more involved in bearing a cross as Jesus’ disciples than wearing a cross-shaped pendant on a gold chain, but sadly, this is as near as some come to fulfilling the Lord’s requirement. Our respective crosses are figurative, as opposed to Jesus’ literal cross, but they are nonetheless real or painful. He pointed toward things His disciples will be called upon to suffer when He spoke of the crosses we must bear.

Not only does the figure of the cross itself point to our sufferings, but the larger context does also. In Luke 9:24 He warned that one who would “...save his life” (i.e., escape persecution by turning back from following Him) would lose it, and He commended the one who would be willing to “...lose his life for my sake” (i.e., make the ultimate sacrifice to follow Him faithfully). In Verse 26 He warned us not to be ashamed of Him and His teachings (implying that the temptation to deny the Lord – as Peter did – will be great when threat and opposition come).

What sort of sufferings constitute the “cross” of a disciple? Is it terminal illness, the death of a beloved wife or husband, a tragic automobile accident in which one is maimed for life, loss of one’s house and its contents in a fire or a storm, or financial failure? It is none of these in and of itself – although one or more of these, under the right circumstances, **could** constitute cross-bearing for Jesus. Atheists, hedonists, pagans, and all other sorts of unbelievers suffer such things, but they are in no sense bearing a cross for Jesus in so doing. All people are subject to such sufferings from time to time, not because they are disciples, but because they are human beings. We live in a time-bound world controlled by physical laws which are blind to the moral quality of human behavior. The most devout disciple and the most extremely wicked reprobate are equally subject to the law of gravity should they fall into the Grand Canyon. The consequence produces suffering, but in neither case is it cross-bearing for Jesus.

The phrase, *for my sake*, is the key to the sort of suffering or sacrifice that constitutes the disciple’s cross. The Lord was speaking of persecution, opposition, suffering that a wicked world brings upon God’s people because they are determined to be loyal to their Master and Savior. Thus if one’s financial collapse is precipitated by his being fired from his job and “black-balled” in his field of employment because he refused to engage in office immorality or to falsify records, then his suffering constitutes the “cross” of which Jesus spoke. If one’s house is torched because he wrote an opinion piece in the local newspaper decrying homosexuality, his loss is a cross borne for Jesus. When a preacher is told by the elders where he preaches that he must avoid certain subjects in his preaching or that he is not to preach the Truth on certain subjects if he wants to keep his job, and he obeys God rather than men (Acts 5:29), his loss of job and income (and the attendant suffering of his family) is a cross he must be willing to bear for the Savior.

The Lord so often warned His disciples – and His prospective disciples – that they would encounter persecution. The final beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount addresses this subject at some length: “Blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for

theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mat. 5:10). Of the eight beatitudes, this is the only one upon which He elaborates:

Blessed are ye when men shall reproach you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets that were before you (vv. 11-12).

The element that makes our sufferings a cross is that they come upon us “for righteousness’ sake” or “for my sake.” Notice once more that in Luke 9:24 Jesus spoke of suffering done “for my sake.” It is evident that the sufferings and trials we endure become a cross borne for Christ only when we experience them **because** we are His disciples. They are the things we endure, rather than denying Him and turning back and walking no more with Him, when evil men oppress us (John 6:66).

Just how far are we expected to go and to what extent are we to endure suffering in bearing our cross after Jesus? Surely, He does not expect us to be willing to endanger our houses or other property or to go to prison. Oh yes, He does. Besides the apostles, other saints in the first century were also imprisoned and some had their possessions confiscated rather than be unfaithful to Jesus—and there is no hint that they should have done otherwise (Heb. 10:34). Paul was “in prisons more abundantly” (2 Cor. 11:23). In fact, the Lord expects us to be willing to die for Him. He has the right to do so because He died for us (1 Tim. 2:6). “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his lord” (Mat. 10:25). Peter wrote on this very subject: “For hereunto were ye called [i.e., to suffer for well-doing, DM]: because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that ye should follow his steps” (1 Pet. 2:20-21). Stephen and James both understood that if discipleship required their lives, they must be willing to give them up—which they did (Acts 7:54-60; 12:1-2).

The Lord instructed the church at Smyrna concerning the extent to which cross-bearing must go:

Fear not the things which thou art about to suffer: behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days. Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life (Rev. 2:10).

These brethren were facing certain imprisonment for the sake of Christ. However, the Lord required them to be faithful not only to the point of suffering imprisonment, but to the point of dying for Him if necessary!¹²

The test of discipleship is not in times when the skies are blue and the winds favorable, but when the storms of hatred, opposition, and ill treatment beat against us. It is depressing to contemplate the effect a severe wave of physical persecution would have on the church of Christ in America. Let me speak plainly: Most who call themselves “disciples” hardly know the meaning of inconvenience, much less deprivation or suffering, because of their religious and/or moral convictions. Perhaps half of the total number of modern American saints are so spiritually insipid that they can neither be begged nor shamed sufficiently to cause them to assemble with their brethren more than once a week. Some of those who come more often have such little moral backbone that they not only join with their neighbors in fulfilling their worldly, soul-damaging lusts, but they defend their “right” to do so. Their worldly associates and television sets are far more influential in their quasi-religious approach to life than is the Master they pretend to follow.

The number of “disciples” is legion who, either through self-imposed ignorance, spiritual apathy, or a liberal attitude toward Scripture, constantly sacrifice the Truth concerning the church, the plan of salvation, purity of life, and a host of other subjects. We are reminded of Jesus’ question to the women who wept for Him as He trudged toward Golgotha: “For if they do these things in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry?” (Luke 23:31). If Jesus’ disciples cannot be persuaded even to **live** for Him in times of peace and freedom, do we suppose they would **suffer** or **die** for Him if peace and freedom perished?

Various ominous indicators suggest that we may be steadily and somewhat rapidly approaching an era of persecution and proscription of Bible-believers and Bible-centered principles. Dark and wicked forces have now bullied and wormed their way into places of power and influence and societal and cultural “respectability.” The lines between right and wrong, good and evil, and truth and error have already been drastically blurred by Marxist, Humanistic, and Postmodern philosophers who dominate theological schools, state universities, and the hierarchy of public education down to the pre-kindergarten level. Gross secularism is on the march in our land.

The “Women’s Liberation” movement of the 1970s failed in its bid for an “equal rights” amendment to our Constitution, but it has nonetheless wrought havoc in our culture in various ways. The legalization of abortion is a direct outgrowth of its mantra of “choice” as a woman’s “right.” Our national psyche has been so confused by the lies of amoral liberals that millions now consider the cruel abortionist the “victim” in this industry (that should be named,

“Murder, Inc.”), rather than the innocent babe he or she sucks or drags out of its mother’s womb. The “Equal Rights Amendment” crowd has influenced many in the church of the Lord to exalt women into leadership roles the Scriptures deny them.

The sodomites, along with their promoters and defenders, are even more militant and blatant than the radical feminists, if possible. Their aim seems to be to turn the entire nation into one huge Sodom/San Francisco. They have powerful and prosperous patrons in political, industrial, and entertainment circles. They likewise are bent on legitimizing, fumigating, and deodorizing sodomy and sodomites. Judges, acting as lawmakers rather than law-enforcers, frequently rule in their favor. Unless something unforeseen retards their march, they will not relent till their representatives and/or sympathizers are officials in every organization in the land. Some denominations have already bowed to their pressures, and they will sooner or later target the Lord’s church for church membership, elder appointment, and preacher employment.

America is the only humanly founded nation ever to exist whose originators – almost to the last man – believed in the God of the Bible and in the Bible as God’s Word, and whose Bill of Rights, Constitution, and criminal and civil laws were to a great extent based upon Bible principles. What ignoble irony that now almost any reference to the Bible and the religion of Christ in our public schools and in public life in general is severely discouraged if not forbidden (although almost every other religion has free course and is even implicitly accepted, if not lauded). How far we have come in our great land when merely to quote a moral or doctrinal Truth from the Bible causes one to be identified as an odious, Bible-toting “fundamentalist” or a member of the radical (and mythical) “vast right-wing conspiracy.”

Several liberal congregations have already surrendered without a fight on the “equal rights” issue pertaining to women in the church. These churches boast of their placement of women in places of leadership and authority over men which are unauthorized in Scripture (e.g., leading prayers and songs and teaching or preaching in adult mixed-gender assemblies, appointment of them as deacons, elders, or “ministers”). Sooner or later there will almost certainly be a precedent-setting case where a woman will sue for and win the “right” to be an “elder” or a “preacher” in a congregation which will not allow such. I can foresee liberal, politically correct judges imposing sanctions upon the congregation if it does not comply (with perhaps crippling fines, confiscation of property, imprisonment of its elders and preacher for non-compliance). What will we do? The same program will eventually be followed by the homosexual forces.

When Isaiah described the conditions abroad in Judah seven centuries before Christ, he also prophetically described the practice of millions of our countrymen: “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isa. 5:20). If the influence of the Bible-, Christ-, and God-haters increases and the cesspool of wickedness enlarges, widespread persecution—the very thing from which many of the early colonists fled as they fled the wilderness of the New World—must eventually come once more. Will we still be disciples if and when we face real persecution? Remember, bearing a cross for Jesus means suffering for His sake, even unto death.

A Disciple Is One Who Is Steadfast

What is the time element, the frequency of followship, prescribed by Jesus for His disciples? Are we to follow Him once or twice annually (the “Christmas” and “Easter” folk)? Are we to follow Him monthly or weekly (which equals “weakly”)? Surely, we will satisfy the requirements of rugged discipleship if we “follow” the Lord three or four hours every week some equate attending religious assemblies with the fullness of faithfulness). I will again speak plainly, even as the Lord did: **none of the above constitutes true discipleship!** Jesus said that the disciple must “...take up his cross **daily** and follow me.” The very frequency and regularity with which we measure the progression of our lives on the calendar must be the frequency and steadfastness of our discipleship.

The religion of Christ is not a “dress” or a “suit” that one can put on for one or two hours or days each week, while it hangs unused and unobserved in one’s closet the remainder of the time. Rather, Christian discipleship is more like one’s physical heart, that vital organ without which he cannot live and that is ever a part of him wherever he goes and whatever he does.

Significantly, the adjective *daily* not only delineates the frequency of our discipleship, but more specifically, it modifies the frequency of our cross-bearing. Jesus therefore challenges His disciples to be willing to suffer every day if necessary to be true to Him. Therefore, let us one and all (who are disciples of God’s dear Son) steel ourselves for the fiery trials that may come upon us, and let us help our children to prepare for such.

Conclusion

When we contemplate the rigorous standard of discipleship the Lord sets before us in Luke 9:23–24, it is evident that men have egregiously redefined downward the entire concept.

However, one who does so purchases a bit of temporary convenience and pleasure at the irreparable cost of his soul. Jesus emphasizes this foolish and astigmatic view of matters in the context before us: “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose or forfeit his own self?” (v. 25).

A familiar hymn-poem by Thomas Shepherd captures the duty of, along with the proper response to and reward for, cross-bearing discipleship:

Must Jesus bear the cross alone,
And all the world go free?
No, there’s a cross for ev’ry one,
And there’s a cross for me.
The consecrated cross I’ll bear
Till He shall set me free,
And then go home my crown to wear,
For there’s a crown for me.

Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. The one possible exception is found in Luke’s usage of “disciples” in Acts 19:1. He refers to the twelve or so men (v. 7) in Ephesus who had erroneously received John’s baptism after it had been superseded by the universal baptism Christ commanded in the great commission (Mat. 28:18–19; Mark 16:15–16). Consider two possible explanations: (1) Luke may have used the term in an accommodative sense. These men assumed, based upon what they had been taught (likely by Apollos) that they were disciples, and Paul initially assumed the same until both he and they learned better. Thus Luke may have employed an accommodation to their assumption. (2) Luke may have referred to them as “disciples” in view of the fact that they did (after Paul taught them and baptized them) become disciples. Thus, he may have used the term to describe their consequent, rather than their initial (i.e., at the time Paul first met them), relationship to the Lord.
3. W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1940, rep. 1966), p. 316.
4. Joseph Henry Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Assoc. Pub. and Auth., Inc., n.d.), p. 386.
5. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957, rep. 1973), p. 486.
6. Vine, p. 316.
7. Thayer, p. 386.
8. Bauer, p. 486.
9. Vine, p. 293.
10. Thayer, p. 74.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
12. This passage does not say what it is often made to mean, namely, that one ought to live a life of faithfulness to Christ until the time of his death. While the Scriptures teach this truth, both implicitly

and explicitly, such is not the meaning of the phrase, *be thou faithful unto death* in this verse. This writer has even heard preachers misread it as *be thou faithful **until** death*, and then misapply it on the basis of the misreading. No, the context is one of persecution for Jesus' sake — persecution that might require their martyrdom. Both the KJV and ASV have the preposition *unto* rather than *until* in this passage. According to Thayer, the preposition, *achri*, **can** serve as a simple conjunction in some constructions, denoting "*until, to the time that.*" However, he specifically identifies this word in Rev. 2:10 as "...a preposition...of manner and degree," meaning "to the enduring of death itself" (91). I seldom reference modern-speech translations because of their frequent perversions, but occasionally they provide wordings that constitute helpful commentary. This phrase provides a case in point, as indicated in the following: Weymouth: "Be faithful, even if you have to die for it"; Williams: "Each one of you must prove to be faithful, even if you have to die"; Knox: "Keep faith with me to the point of death, and I will crown thee with life."

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the 1st Annual Schertz Lectures, hosted by the Schertz, TX, Church of Christ, Nov. 9–13, 2003. It was published in the book of the lectures, *Studies in Luke*, ed. Dub McClish (Cibolo, TX: The Gospel Journal, Inc.). The Annual Schertz Lectures were successors to the long-running Annual Denton Lectures when they were discontinued in 2002 by the Pearl St. Church of Christ, Denton, TX.]

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