

# The Experience of Being a Disciple

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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## Readings

*Psalms 19:7-11 (Kempton Translation, modified)*

- 7 The law of Jehovah is perfect, restoring the soul;  
The testimony of Jehovah is faithful, making wise the simple.
- 8 The precepts of Jehovah are upright, making glad the heart;  
The commandment of Jehovah is pure, enlightening the eyes.
- 9 The fear of Jehovah is clean, standing forever;  
The judgments of Jehovah are truth, they are just altogether.
- 10 More to be desired are they than gold, and than much fine gold;  
And sweeter than honey and the dropping of honeycombs.
- 11 Also by them is Your servant warned;  
In keeping them there is much reward.

*Matthew 16:13-17, 20-28 (Kempton Translation, modified)*

13 And Jesus, coming into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?"

14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and some Elijah; and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets."

15 He says to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

16 And Simon Peter answering said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

17 And Jesus answering said to him, "You are blessed, Simon bar-Jonah, because flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in the heavens."

....

20 Then He charged His disciples that they should say to no one that He was Jesus the Christ.

21 From then on Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.

<sup>22</sup> And Peter, taking Him aside, began to rebuke Him, saying, "Mercy, Lord; this shall not happen to You."

<sup>23</sup> But turning, He said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan; you are an offense to Me, because you are not wise in the things of God, but the things of men."

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wills to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever wills to save his soul, shall lose it, but whoever shall lose his soul for My sake, shall find it. <sup>26</sup> For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, but be deprived of his soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? <sup>27</sup> For the Son of Man is about to come in the glory of His Father, with His angels; and then He shall render to everyone according to his works. <sup>28</sup> Amen I say to you, there are some standing here, who shall not taste of death, until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

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[T]he disciples themselves, who spent all their time with the Lord and heard so much about His kingdom... were not yet able to perceive inner truth. The only view of the Lord they could form was... that He would raise the Jewish people to a position of power and glory over all the nations in the entire world. After listening to all the Lord said about His heavenly kingdom, they still could not help thinking that the heavenly kingdom would resemble an earthly one. .... So after the Lord taught them what it was to be greatest in heaven (Matthew 20; Mark 10), He still spoke in terms they could grasp, saying that they would sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22; Matthew 19).

They were not told that "disciples" meant not them but everyone with the goodness that comes of love and faith; that there are no thrones in the Lord's kingdom, or the kinds of sovereignty and autocratic power found in the world; or that they were incapable of passing even the most limited judgment on a single person. If they had been told, they would have spurned the news and each gone back to his own business, leaving the Lord behind. He spoke this way so that they would accept it and be introduced by it to inner truth. Hidden within the external truths the Lord spoke lay internal truths, which come out in the open with time, and once they come out, the external truths disappear, serving only as a stimulus or means for thought about internal truths.

## Introduction

- What is it like to be the Lord's disciple – to be someone who is trying to follow and learn from the Lord?
  - We might have some accurate ideas; and we might have some inaccurate ideas.
- To get a better sense of what it's really like, we're going to look at two stories of the Lord working with His disciples and we'll see what we can learn from them.
  - Let's jump right into our first story, the story from our lessons.

## Story 1: "Who do you say that I am?"

### *"You are blessed...."*

- In this story, Jesus does something that all good teachers of students or disciples does, He asks His disciples questions.
- He first asks them who other people say that He is, and then He puts them on the spot and says, "But who do you say that I am?"
- And Peter gets it right: he says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
  
- Peter and the other disciples had been following Jesus for some time now and they had had unique opportunities to see Jesus do a lot of amazing things and to hear Him teach amazing things.
  - A few chapters before our story for today, the Lord even commented on the unique opportunity that they were having: He said,
    - "16 But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; 17 for amen, I say to you that many prophets and just men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (Matthew 13:16, 17).
  - And in our story, after Peter gives his good answer, the Lord says,
    - "You are blessed, Simon bar-Jonah, because flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in the heavens."
  
- This is part of what we would hope for from our experience of being the Lord's disciple – that we would be blessed by the experience; that we would see, hear, and understand things that we wouldn't otherwise because of our spending time following the Lord.
  - And that does happen.

- When we come to church, when we read the Lord's Word for ourselves, and especially when we try to live according to what the Lord says, we see, hear, and understand things that we would absolutely not know see, hear, and understand otherwise.
- We can understand our God and His world much better than flesh and blood could ever explain to us.
- Our Heavenly Father does reveal things to us when we make the effort to open ourselves up to Him and His teaching and leading.

### ***"Get behind Me, Satan...."***

- However, to be a disciple of the Lord is not just one experience of blessedness and enlightenment after another.
  - As we see illustrated perfectly and painfully by Peter, moments later in our story.
- One of the implications of Jesus being the Christ or the Messiah is that He would suffer.
  - There are prophecies about the Messiah being victorious but there also prophecies about Him being wounded, bruised, oppressed, and afflicted (Isaiah 52-53).
- And so the Lord tried to explain this:
  - "From then on Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day."
- But Peter wasn't buying it.
  - In His mind, Jesus was getting this all wrong.
  - So Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked Him and said, "That's not going to happen!"
- When Peter does this, it's easy to see how ridiculous it is.
  - Who did he think he was?
  - Why did he think that it was his place to tell the Messiah what was and was not going to happen, and what He should and should not say?
- When you read the Word you might have thoughts occur to you like these:
  - "What is the Lord talking about?"
  - "Why did He say it *that way*?"
  - "Why could He not be more clear about *this*?"

- "Surely, it would have been better if the Lord had just done this, this, and this!"
- Those thoughts are just like Peter rebuking the Lord and telling Him that He got it wrong.
  - It is just as ridiculous for any of us – in all our wisdom – to presume to know better than the Lord how He should have done something or said something.
- It was wrong of Peter to rebuke the Lord and so the Lord corrected His disciple: He said,
  - "Get behind Me, Satan; you are an offense to Me, because you are not wise in the things of God, but the things of men."
    - Ouch!
    - Imagine being called "Satan" by the Lord!
  - But the reality was that there was something satanic in Peter.
    - The term "satan" means enemy, or adversary, or opponent.
    - And the thing in Peter that was telling the Lord that He was wrong, was something opposing what the Lord wanted.
  - And we all have something in us that is an enemy to the Lord, that is opposed to what the Lord wants.
    - The Lord said to Peter that he was "not wise in the things of God, but the things of men."
    - This is true of us too.
      - There is part of us that is good at – is wise in – trying to get the earthly things that we want.
      - And that part of us is not wise when it comes to the things of God.
        - That part of us wants to use the things of God to get what we want.
        - That part of us wants to tell God what He should do and say.

### ***The Lord Calling Out His Disciples***

- The Lord, as our teacher, will need to keep calling that worldly part of us out and keep encouraging us to lift our minds to higher things.
- Here are just a few of some of the things the Lord said to His disciples, along these lines:
  - "O faithless and perverse generation....." (Matthew 17:17).
  - "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" (Matthew 8:26).
  - "How is it you do not understand....?" (Matthew 16:11).

- "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!" (Luke 24:25).
- We might picture Him saying some of these things with a stern look on His face, but it's important to remember that all of the things the Lord said to His disciples was out of love for them and an abundance of mercy and understanding of them and their state.
  - We can, perhaps, hear that a bit more in this statement:
    - "If then God so clothes the grass, which today is in the field and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will He clothe you, O you of little faith?" (Luke 12:28).
    - He knows that they have little faith and trust in Him.
    - He knows that they could have more faith and that it would benefit them if they did.
      - And so He lovingly points this out to them.
- And the Lord also knows that His disciples will come to understand more as time passes.
  - For example, one time He said this:
    - "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this" (John 13:7).
    - He knew that they could understand more in time.
    - Just like it said in our lesson from the teachings for the New Church.
      - "[T]he disciples themselves, who spent all their time with the Lord and heard so much about His kingdom... were not yet able to perceive inner truth. .... Hidden within the external truths the Lord spoke lay internal truths, which come out in the open with time...."
- This is the miracle of how the Lord teaches and leads us.
  - He teaches us things that we do understand and things that we don't understand yet.
  - He speaks to us in the ways we think things work and He also teaches us the way things actually work, even if we don't really get it yet.
  - Part of what we need to hold onto as His disciples is that we will understand better with time, if we are willing to stick with the Lord.

## Story 2: "You have the sayings of eternal life."

- Now let's take a look at our second story of the Lord teaching His disciples.
- He said this:
  - <sup>53</sup> Then Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. <sup>54</sup> He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him again at the last day. <sup>55</sup> For My flesh is truly food, and My blood is truly drink. <sup>56</sup> He who eats My flesh, and drinks My blood, remains in Me, and I in him." (John 6:53-56)
- Not surprisingly, His disciples were confused by this.
  - It says, "Therefore many of His disciples, when they had heard, said, 'This word is hard; who can hear it?'" (John 6:60).
- The Lord knew that they were confused and so He explained some more and said this: "It is the spirit that makes alive; the flesh profits nothing; the sayings which I speak to you are spirit, and are life" (John 6:63).
  - He was explaining that He was talking in a spiritual way, not just a literal way, but still many of His disciples stopped following Him.
  - It says, "From this time many of His disciples went away into things behind, and walked no more with Him" (John 6:66).
    - Those people couldn't raise their minds above the earthly things of men and so they weren't willing to keep being the Lord's disciples.
- And so the Lord asked His twelve disciples, "Do you also want to go away?" (John 6:67).
  - And it seems very unlikely that they had any better understanding of what the Lord was talking about when He said that people needed to eat His flesh and drink His blood.
    - Even we today, with the help of the teachings of the New Church, still might feel somewhat uncomfortable with what the Lord said.
    - We might even think, "Did the Lord have to be so confusing? Did He really need to say it that way?"
  - And yet, the Lord's twelve disciples, though they likely did not fully understand what the Lord meant, still chose to keep following Him.
    - "Then Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the sayings of eternal life. And we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'" (John 6:68, 69).

- Over time, they had “come to believe and know” that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God.
- And because of who they believed He was, they didn’t need to fully understand what He was talking about in that moment.
  - They knew that He was the one teaching them the “sayings of eternal life” and maybe they trusted that they would eventually better understand what He was talking about.
  - We need a similar trust and humility to be the Lord’s disciple.

## Taking Up Our Cross Daily to Follow the Lord

- It is hard to be humbled.
- It is hard to be corrected and told that we got something wrong.
- Its is hard to trust the Lord.
- And all of those things get easier with practice.
- The Lord tells us, as His disciples, that we should expect to have to practice these things regularly.
- In our lesson the Lord said, “If anyone wills to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24).
  - And in a parallel place in another gospel He says, “If anyone wills to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9:23).
  - To be the Lord’s disciple is to be daily sacrificing our egos, our sense that we know better than the Lord, our feeling that we already know everything we need to know.
- That is a way of thinking and a way of being that we can get into the habit of.
  - Listen to this passage about good habits that we can cultivate:
    - [Leading the life of heaven] is simply a matter of recognizing, when something attractive comes up that we know is dishonest or unjust, that this is not to be done because it is against the divine commandments. If we get used to thinking like this, and from this familiarity form a habit, then we are gradually united to heaven. To the extent that we are united to heaven, the higher levels of our minds are opened, and to the extent that they are opened, we see what is dishonest and unjust; and to the extent that we see this, these qualities can be dispelled. (*Heaven and Hell* 533)

- Let's get in the habit of being humbled by the Lord.
- Let's get good at being corrected by Him.
- Let's get comfortable and familiar with the daily work of taking our cross to be the Lord's disciple.

## Conclusion

- So, what is it like to be the Lord's disciple – to be someone who is trying to follow and learn from the Lord?
  - Sometimes you'll be blessed with understanding from heaven.
  - Sometimes you'll be blessed to realize that the Lord is right and you're wrong.
  - Sometimes you'll be confused by what the Lord's saying.
  - Sometimes you'll need to trust that you'll understand better later on and, in the meanwhile, keep following the One who has the sayings of eternal life.
  - Sometimes what the Lord will require of you is that you do justly, love mercy, and humble yourself to walk with your God (Micah 6:8).
- *Amen.*

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