

Historical Jesus 7: Disciples of Jesus

Having looked at Jesus the rabbi, we are now poised to consider what it means to be his disciple. As it turns out, Jesus spoke quite a bit about what he expected from his followers.

Early in his ministry, Jesus called several men to follow him. We may find a parallel to this in Elijah calling Elisha to be his successor.¹ The disciples were an eclectic group including fishermen, a tax-collector, and a zealot.² In addition to his inner group, quite a number of other men and even women followed him as well, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna (Luke 8:1-3).

What It Means To Be a Disciple

At its most basic level, a disciple is a student—someone who learns and adheres to the way of life taught and lived by the rabbi. Jesus emphasized this point when he said, “Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46). Another time he said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32).

As we saw last time, the heart of Jesus’ philosophy of life was to love the one God and our neighbors as ourselves, so it should come as no surprise that this is the identifying characteristic of his true disciples. He said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

The rabbi determines what he requires of his disciples, not the other way around. In our time we often get this backwards. We think we can pick and choose what sayings of Jesus will work for us while safely ignoring the rest, but Jesus does not give us that option. He says we must abide in his word; he wants absolute commitment.

The Cost of Discipleship

When Jesus sent the twelve out on their mission to extend his ministry, he gave them detailed instructions (Luke 9:1-6). Jesus, furthermore, knew that persecution would certainly come to his missionaries:

Mat 10:16-25

16 Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. 17 Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, 18 and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. 19 When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. 20 For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. 21 Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, 22 and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 23 When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. 24 A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. 25 It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

When he sent out the 72, he gave them similar instructions (Luke 10:1-12). After completing their mission, they returned with great rejoicing (Luke 10:17-21).

¹ When Elijah called Elisha, he left everything and even sacrificed his oxen, crippling his ability to make a living, and followed after Elijah immediately (1 Kings 19:19-21).

² A generation after Christ, the party of the zealots succeeded in fomenting a revolution against Rome.

People were always flocking to Jesus. Some of them wanted to become his disciples. He explained what that would entail (Luke 9:23-26). Later on, he again explained his requirements if someone would be his disciple (Luke 14:25-35). Several times he encountered people who wanted to follow him, but were not ready to drop everything and come after him (Luke 9:57-62; Matthew 8:18-23). He did not change his requirements to accommodate their busy schedules.

For Jesus, he insisted that loyalty to him trump traditional family connections (Mark 3:31-35; Luke 11:27-28). Actually, he knew that following him would cause family divisions (Luke 12:51-53), a fact he knew well; "For not even his brothers believed in him" (John 7:5).

After Jesus' sermon about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, many of his disciples grumbled and even quit following him:

John 6:60-69

60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" 61 But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit which gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But there are some of you who do not believe." (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) 65 And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." 66 After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. 67 So Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, 69 and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

The Rewards of Discipleship

Jesus' whole life focused on bringing God glory. He recognized that God would receive glory as his disciples bore much fruit (John 15:8). Beyond this, he offered to lighten their loads:

Matthew 11:28-30

28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Still, that was not all. Once Peter asked Jesus what he and the other eleven would get as a reward for leaving everything and following him. Jesus did not rebuke Peter, but answered him honestly:

Matthew 19:27-29

27 Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" 28 Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.

He promised eternal life for those who heard his voice and followed him.

John 10:27-28

27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

Historical Jesus 8: Paradoxical Submission

Jesus enjoyed an intimate relationship with his father. He often spent time with God in prayer. For example, when he first began his ministry, he went to Peter's house and healed a ton of people. Then, he got up early and disappeared:

Mark 1:35-37

35 And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, 37 and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you."

Right before he chose the twelve to be his closest disciples, he spent all night in prayer on a mountain (Luke 6:12). As his popularity increased "he would withdraw to desolate places and pray" (Luke 5:16). It was when he finished praying in a certain place that his disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). After feeding the five thousand, he sent his disciples away on a boat and went up on the mountain by himself to pray, late into evening (Matthew 14:22-23).³ He was one with God.⁴

He Depended on the God for Everything

Jesus shows us the paradox of greatness through utter submission. Forty times in the Gospel of John, Jesus says his father sent him. He was utterly transparent to someone else. He said, "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me" (John 12:44-45). Another time he said, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" (John 14:9-10).

How was Jesus able to stay in tune with his father? God had anointed him with his spirit.

Isaiah 11:2-3

2 And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. 3 And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear,

Isaiah 61:1

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

"God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19). Jesus totally depended on God. He had no pride in his own abilities, but deeply trusted in God. This is the greatness of Jesus. For example, one time his critics wrongly thought that in calling God his father, he was somehow claiming equality with him. Jesus replied to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise" (John 5:19). Shortly thereafter he said, "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 5:30). Jesus did nothing on his own authority (John 8:28). He recognized his father was greater than he was (John 14:28); for that is precisely why he trusted him and leaned on him so heavily.

Jesus Spoke God's Words

³ Jesus' famous miracle of walking on the water resulted from his desire to spend time alone with God. By the time he was ready to go they were already a good distance out on the lake.

⁴ This does not mean he was one in essence or substance, but one as a husband and wife are one. In fact, he prayed that we be one as he is one with the father (John 17:11).

From the time of Moses, a prophecy declared that God would raise up another like him. God said, "I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (Deuteronomy 18.18).⁵ Jesus fulfilled this prophecy magnificently. Look at how he repeatedly gave God the credit for what he said.

- "For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the spirit without measure." (John 3.34)
- "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me." (John 7.16)
- "He who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him." (John 8.26)
- "For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me." (John 12.49)
- "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority" (John 14.10)
- "The word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me." (John 14.24)
- "For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me." (John 17.8)

Jesus Did God's Will and Works

Jesus' prime concern was what his father wanted. He constantly asked himself what would please God. Consider these statements he made about doing God's will:

- "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." (John 4.34)
- "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me." (John 6.38)
- "I always do the things that are pleasing to him" (John 8.29)
- "I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father." (John 14.31)

The miracles and deeds of Christ likewise came from his father. Jesus did not even claim the ability to heal. He knew God was the one empowering him to go about "doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10.38). God enabled and authorized him to perform these signs so that people would believe that he really was in Christ (John 5.36-38; 10.25).

- "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." (John 10.37-38)
- "The Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves." (John 14.10-11)

God Gave Jesus Authority

Throughout the ages God chose unlikely people to work with in order to bring about his plans. Moses, Saul, and David were simple shepherds whom God raised up to accomplish mighty deeds. Because Jesus completely submitted his own will to his father's, God gave him extraordinary authority. It's easy to misunderstand some of Jesus' shocking statements about absolute loyalty that we looked at last time. Jesus expects his followers to put him before their parents, spouses, and children. Was this because Jesus was an out-of-control megalomaniac? No, he knew he represented God to people. He was God's anointed one whom he sent to save us. As a result, how they respond to the son would determine their relationship with the father. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me" (John 14.6). He reveals God to the world. He said, "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1.18).⁶

⁵ Some people believed Jesus was "the prophet" while others thought he was the messiah or an imposter (John 7.40).

⁶ See also Luke 10.22: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

As a result of Christ's utter submission to God's will, He gave him astounding authority. Jesus said, "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand." (John 3:35) Consider this text about God conferring on Jesus the task of raising the dead:

John 5:26-30

26 For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. 27 And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. 28 Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice 29 and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. 30 "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

The relationship was two way. Jesus humbled himself completely before God now, so God promised to exalt him above everyone else later.⁷ Often the skeptics of Jesus' time misunderstood and twisted what he said regarding his relationship to the Father. It's important, especially when reading John's Gospel, to recognize who is saying what. We want to be careful not to side with Jesus' critics. For example, in one incident they thought Jesus was claiming to be God. Here is how Jesus handled that situation:

John 10:24-39

24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." 25 Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. 27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one." 31 The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. 32 Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?" 33 The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God." 34 Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? 35 If he called them gods to whom the word of God came-- and Scripture cannot be broken-- 36 do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? 37 If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; 38 but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." 39 Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.

Jesus is not claiming to be God but God's representative or agent to carry out His will. The psalm Jesus quoted talks about God judging unjust rulers. He called them gods because they were His agents who were supposed to do His will. However, these wicked ones did not submit to God's will, so He tells them: "I said, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince'" (Psalm 82:6-7). Jesus uses this secondary usage of the word "God" as one who represents God and does His will to explain his relationship with the Father.⁸

As we will see, God's exaltation of Jesus did not end there. After his resurrection Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Mt 28:18). Later on, after he ascends we read that God "seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:20-23). Today, Jesus is the highest exalted being in the universe, next to God. How did he get there? It wasn't by clawing his way to the top, stepping on

⁷ Christ's exaltation begins with his resurrection and ascension but doesn't culminate until he returns in power to establish God's righteous reign on the earth.

⁸ Examples of others called "god" because they represented him include Moses (Exodus 7.1), local judges (Exodus 21.7; 22.8-9), the king of Israel (Psalm 45.6), the Messiah (Isaiah 9.6), and the angels (Psalm 8.5; cf. Hebrews 2.7).

those beneath him. No, he emptied himself of himself so that God could fully indwell him. If the greatest man who ever lived depended on God this much, how much more should we trust in God and seek His guidance on how to live, what to say, and what to do?