

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP – I NEED TO BE TRANSFORMED

A. The Character of Christ - Being Prepared To Change

A Moment in the Life of a Disciple (5)

For the best part of three years you have hung around with Jesus and his roving band of followers. You have travelled, eaten, slept out under the stars and got cold and hungry together. The amazing thing has been the extent to which Jesus has opened Himself up to the group. The relationship you have all shared has been based on trust and honesty, not just esoteric instruction or emotional manipulation that characterizes other Masters and their disciples. Jesus' teaching is simple but very confronting. It is beyond philosophy or ethics. He emphasizes relationship with God, character and renewal. He demands obedience; yet He is not a demagogue. You often reflect on the personality differences between the disciples. In other times and places they would have had nothing to do with one another. They belonged to different circles. Peter is uneducated, explosive and impetuous; he seems a born leader but is apt to "put his foot in it" when things go wrong. John is young and impressionable, but he sometimes "loses it". Jesus has nicknamed him and James "sons of thunder". Matthew is educated; he used to work as a tax collector, an occupation Jews hate and urban guerillas routinely murder. Before he met Jesus, Simon was a Zealot, a member of a reactionary ultra-nationalist party whose members assassinate Roman officials and their stooges, particularly tax collectors. It has taken a minor miracle to get the two of them to work together. Jesus took this group of men, and others like them, from very different backgrounds and passions, and invited them to live with Him. From the first day, when they wanted to know where he lived he invited them home. After that they never really left. Jesus united them and transformed their lives. Few people are prepared to be that open. Or vulnerable. He did so because the key to pleasing God and experiencing the fulfilled life is by imbibing His character and values. When the disciples are imperious He serves them. When they complain about life he models a thankful attitude. When they become resentful and want to manipulate God's power to destroy others, He uses it to touch people for good, regardless of whether or not they are grateful. He faces down opposition that is organized by the powerful religious leaders. They can't fault Him, which makes them doubly furious. Jesus seems so different, so perfect. You all admire Him, but agree it would be asking too much to be expected to be like Him. One day he poses that very challenge: anyone who wants to be His disciple must be perfect, just like Him; they must be more godly than the religious parties, without depending on their own strength to do so. Discipleship is going to mean radical transformation and there will be no turning back. Pay the cost and be prepared to change if you want to remain in the group.

As Christians our ultimate goal is to know Jesus and become like Him. The external character of a disciple is a reflection of what is happening on the inside. That's 24/7. Anything less is not discipleship; it is just a hobby.

The people of God in your society

Many non-Christians in the West view churches as moral guardians and grudgingly or indifferently accept their function on the social landscape. But what about the role of individual Christians, located in the marketplace six days a week? How should we live when we are the only Christians in our work world? To whom are we accountable? What are our limits? What “right” do we have to be different when so many people are comfortable with conformity?

The Biblical answer is: wherever we are we represent Jesus Christ and our first loyalty is to our Heavenly Father. As followers of Jesus, we are not simply members of a Church; we are THE Church.

I often meet people who are surprised (and uncomfortable) when they meet Christians who view the world outside church walls, and their part in it, from God’s viewpoint. “Who do you think you are”, they demand, “God’s agent?” Most are accustomed to Christianity operating in an organized, established way, putting on Christmas pageants, conducting weddings and funerals and looking after the poor, but otherwise not interfering in their lives. Contemporary Western society is not overtly “religious”. Christians who pursue worship and faith that are both meaningful and helpful in daily life do not fit the common stereotype.

At the heart of vital and effective discipleship is a live, personal and growing faith and relationship with Jesus. By extension, a valid purpose of a community of disciples is to point others to God, helping them discover and worship Him and live out Christian faith in all aspects of their lives. Faith doesn’t grow in isolation. The Bible teaches that Christians are to be like “light in the dark”; “salt” that flavours food; and “yeast” that makes dough rise. We are not to be bound by the confines of a church sanctuary but free to follow Jesus at home, within the family, at work, in community groups, interest groups and sports and social clubs. That means influencing people around us, including those who are different in age, socio-economic status, ethnic grouping and special interests.

The link between belief and life

Strong connections exist between what we believe and who we are in practice. When you look at someone and listen to their speech closely enough you can tell what is important in their lives and whether they are being hypocritical. If they are aware of the fact that they are under the spotlight they may put up fronts – for a while. But what about when no one is looking?

Character means making the hard choices to do what is “right”. It means living honestly, paying taxes accurately, running our business affairs according to the law, remaining morally faithful (even in our thoughts), pursuing relationships based on truth and saying “No” when it is necessary to do so, not simply expedient. Character is not just doing what is expected by God and good people because they are monitoring us; it is having a heart that genuinely wants integrity. The grace of God (through the Holy Spirit in us) teaches us how to say “No” to sin (Titus 2:11). The true disciple is, first of all, a man or woman of God.

Growth in discipleship and conformity to the image of Jesus don't come about naturally; but are the results (the "fruit") of values we esteem, boundaries we set, decisions we make, our willingness to change and the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. If you are serious about your decision to identify as a disciple of Christ you will be called on to make decisions that realign or re-define your priorities and styles, thought life, feelings, speech, work, study environment and financial affairs. This call demands character transformation. It involves more than merely painting over cracks (like tradesmen in Lima, where I once lived, who re-plastered buildings after earth tremors but left the structures flawed).

Change through discipleship is ongoing and incremental, making us more like the Saviour as time goes on. Anything less than the character of Christ is not discipleship. Anything more is equally not valid. The disciple is not greater than his or her Lord (John 15:20).

There were many people in Jesus' day who followed Him on the edges of the crowd, but who thought they were "right" and didn't need to change. Growth and maturity as God's people are more than assuming that Jesus' personality will simply "rub off on us" if we hang around long enough. (After all, nature trends to degenerate, not improve. It is true that "Bad company corrupts good character"; 1 Corinthians 15:33.) Discipleship involves obedience to the Lordship of Christ – all the time. Jesus confronts us with the challenge: "*Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?*" (Luke 9:46).

The first disciples were able to imitate many of Jesus mannerisms long before they became Christians in the true sense of the word. All too often, believers assume that they are growing and maturing, when, at heart, all that is occurring is that they are going through motions and becoming smug about their level of "spirituality". Jesus calls us to die to ourselves (including our achievements), not to feel good about how well we are doing. The Christian life is about Him; not us.

Evidences of real growth and maturity

I vividly recall a church service, in which the senior pastor preached about spiritual growth. He made the somewhat rash statement that those who came forward for prayer at the end of the service would return to their seats "more mature Christians". As a consequence, the front of the church was packed as scores of people crowded around the preacher looking for the advertised short-cut, expecting in an instant the type of growth that normally has to be lived through, growing pains and all, to be authentic. We need to take heed of embracing cheap and easy formulae, lest, self-confidently thinking we are standing strong, we set ourselves up to fall and be unfruitful in areas that count. Some things in life are obtained in a moment: like instant coffee; hamburgers and fries, instant dinners (thanks to microwaves), mashed potato (add hot water and stir) and instant messaging. Some people have conceptualized "instant karma". Discipleship, on the other hand, is a life-long experience. It is anything but accelerated. Weeds grow overnight; oaks take years to mature. It doesn't take an Einstein to tell which of the two endures over time. Worthwhile growth comes through fresh commitments to follow Jesus every day, for the rest of our lives.

The Apostle Peter's second letter to a group of first century churches has a great deal to say about growth and maturity as disciples. It is worth reproducing the entire quote here:

“As we know Jesus better, his divine power gives us everything we need for living a godly life. He has called us to receive his own glory and goodness! And by that same mighty power, he has given us all of his rich and wonderful promises. He has promised that you will escape the decadence all around you caused by evil desires and that you will share in his divine nature.

“So make every effort to apply the benefits of these promises to your life. Then your faith will produce a life of moral excellence. A life of moral excellence leads to knowing God better. Knowing God leads to self-control. Self-control leads to patient endurance, and patient endurance leads to godliness. Godliness leads to love for other Christians, and finally you will grow to have genuine love for everyone. The more you grow like this, the more you will become productive and useful in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But those who fail to develop these virtues are blind or, at least, very shortsighted. They have already forgotten that God has cleansed them from their old life of sin.

“So, dear brothers and sisters, work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen. Doing this, you will never stumble or fall away. And God will open wide the gates of heaven for you to enter into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:3-11 New Living Translation)

Let's look at this list a bit more closely: Peter urges us to build into our character a number of features that will remind the world of Jesus (as it should, if we are genuine disciples):

- faith (without continuous faith in God for everything we cannot grow; it is the bedrock of discipleship)
- moral excellence, goodness (what the world sees, because our hearts and appetites are being transformed into those of Jesus)
- knowing God better (not simply an accumulation of facts in our brains but transformation of our minds and motivation)
- self-control (compared with being “out of control”, or controlled by circumstances or other people)
- patient endurance and perseverance (this includes keeping going as Christians, even when we don't feel like it; when we feel weak, confused, disappointed, discouraged, angry, or are suffering setbacks)
- godliness (being like our Father in Heaven)
- love for other Christians; brotherly kindness (if we can't love one another as believers, how can we hope to love the world around us?)
- love for everyone (having the love of God, and love for God, in everything we do, in all our relationships, regardless of the actions and attitudes of others).

This is a tall order. It demonstrates that becoming a committed follower of Jesus, is just the first step in a committed life of active discipleship. It is clear that the end product has nothing to do with how long we have been Christians, but how we live.

Time alone will not do it (see Hebrews 5:11-14). Failure to grow as disciples is a result of failure to take heed of the key indicators mentioned by Peter. Nor does it have anything to do with how we “feel”. Did you read “feelings” on the list?

How about “self-esteem”? It’s not there either. Growing as disciples is, when all is said and done, how we decide, with our will. We become believers, not on the basis of emotions alone, but the exercise of choice. We grow as Christians through the decisions we make every day. God does the rest.

The building blocks of discipleship are held together by the power and promises of God. Christian character does not come about through self-effort or hoping for the best, but by yielding to the transforming radical work of the Holy Spirit.

Peter goes on to point out that if we are not growing as disciples, we are going backwards. Not only will we become “ineffective and unproductive in our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ”, we will become set in our ways and unable to detect that we are going nowhere fast. When you think you are doing well, or are comfortable with your life, change is difficult. If you are “cruising along” as a Christian, take inventory against Peter’s words and you will see, if you are honest, that there is always room for growth and change.

Character that convicts others

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day all came from the same mould: conform to expectations or perish. This wasn’t discipleship; it was crowd control, for political and personal agendas. When Jesus came along he didn’t fit into the mould, so they set out to destroy Him. As Christians in the marketplace we can’t afford to be squeezed into moulds either (Romans 12:2). We should not be surprised if our form of discipleship disturbs others and raises hackles, even if such hostility is irrational.

“(Jesus said) Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. (John 15:20)

As we grow in character as Christians our priorities and goals alter. Being a disciple sometimes leads to conflicts in relationships with others (Matthew 10:34-36). For example, when a work colleague, a business partner or a spouse becomes a Christian and sets out to live for Christ, their life patterns are re-aligned. This can lead to tensions in the way they interact with others. Such tensions are understandable if the Christian comes across as pious and obnoxious. On the other hand, just being a follower of Christ is often sufficient to produce relational stresses because colleagues do not share our values, or feel uncomfortable about our beliefs.

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.” (1 Peter 4:12-16)

In Jesus’ day, it was the priests, who claimed to represent God, who opposed Him more than anyone else. It has been the same down through history.

Some years ago I was posted to Seville, to oversee the construction of the Australian Pavilion for the Universal Exposition hosted by Spain, and to manage protocol and operations during the event. Occupying 215 hectares of the “Isla de la Cartuja” on the Guadalquivir River, the Expo provided a unique opportunity for 112 countries and a clutch of transnational mega-corporations to showcase the best they could offer on the world stage.

Not far from the Expo precinct, on prime real estate, was a gravel car park. Its location was incongruous. All around it were beautiful buildings and elaborate statues celebrating the Habsburg dynasty and Spain’s long and colourful history, but this site was undeveloped. When I asked why it had apparently been overlooked and only served as an outdoor car park locals told me it had been the site of executions of “heretics” during the long Spanish Inquisition.

Just to be sure, I consulted better records than street mythology. Sure enough, they confirmed that this was the spot where individuals whom the church authorities deemed not fit to live, and were “handed over to the secular arm” (after all, the organized Church piously did not want to be associated with the taking of human life) for punishment, were paraded through the street, tied to stakes on top of piles of wood and slowly burned to death. They did this because the religious authorities believed there was virtue in undertaking an “Auto de Fe” (an Act of Faith) to destroy the body in hope of saving the soul. Many of those who perished were evangelical Christians. Their version of Christianity did not meet official expectations, so they were done away with.

The test of discipleship for the church of the day was unquestioning conformity to dogma, ethnic purity and political correctness of the worst kind. Those who presided over the system thought they were serving God (cf Romans 10:2). They believed that they had the monopoly over the character of Jesus Christ and His teaching.

Celebrating change that makes us like Jesus

Christian character emerges as the Holy Spirit transforms us.

“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10)

The Campa village of San Francisco (St Francis) lies on the Ucayali River in Pucallpa, Peru. The stream is part of the headwaters of the mighty Amazon River. It is the location of an important operational base of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, a community of missionaries working with language groups of the area (42, when I first visited). Using aircraft they criss-cross huge swathes of jungle it once took weeks or months to traverse. San Francisco hasn't changed much; it still looks fairly "indigenous". As Miguel (his adopted Western name) took me around his village he pointed out how grass huts were made, where animals were kept and how the families escaped rising waters during wet seasons. Chickens scratched the earth and fled when we approached. Children played in the water. Women chatted. Old men sat and stared.

I asked Miguel what life was like before the missionaries came. "We killed our neighbours, to avoid being killed. There were no laws. Our lives were short. We learned the hard way that we could trust no one." He showed me bows and arrows decked out with colourful plumes of local birds. "When food was scarce, we robbed our neighbours or we died." Miguel went on. If I had come here when he was a boy, I would have needed weapons to defend myself. Why, I asked, did the villagers change? "Because of the missionaries. They came in canoes and told us about Jesus. We couldn't understand what they were saying at first, but one day we understood; we believed what they said and we changed". What visitors see today is a new village, with new people, living differently. The evidence of discipleship in faraway San Francisco, Peru, was transformation that not only made people think and act differently; it also saved the community from man-made disaster.

Paul says we are God's "workmanship". That word has two meanings; the first denotes the work He performs in our lives; the other is the basis for our word "poem". Transformed lives are poetry in action, eloquent expressions of the "Word" of God breathed into us, making us new. This change takes place when we allow God to have His way in our hearts and minds. Following Christ moves from mere assent to deep and abiding commitment to the person of Jesus, who died for us, so that we could represent His life to the world.

The culmination of change

I recently saw a sign on a partition separating clients from renovation works in The Regent Hotel in Singapore. It stated:

"We ask your patience whilst the pursuit of perfection is in progress"

Discipleship does not imply having "arrived", as far as Christian character is concerned. It is a life-long journey. From the moment we become Christians the work of perfection is under way. We don't always see the change taking place.

As we are being transformed, the world around us will be able to see beyond our limits and mistakes and acknowledge that the power in us is not something we generate, but comes from the wisdom and power of our Heavenly Father. You and I are "called" to be like Jesus. Are you ready to change?