

# **FOLLOW MY LEADER: CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP**

by Nigel Graham

## **1. Distinctive Discipleship**

*Reading: Matthew 4:18-22; 5:1-2; 8:18-22*

## **2. Discipleship: Having the BE ATTITUDE**

*Reading: Matthew 5:3-12*

## **3. Salt and Light Discipleship**

*Reading: Matthew 5:13-16; Mark 9:50; Colossians 4:5 – 6; Luke 11:33-36; John 12:35-36a; Romans 13:11-14; Ephesians 5:5-14; 1 John 1:5-7; 2:9-11*

## **4. Discipleship and the Bible**

*Reading: Matthew 5:17-24, 27-28, 38-39, 43-48; Luke 24:44*

### **Discussion questions:**

Which of these Beatitudes do you find most challenging in your journey of Christian discipleship? What steps can you take to begin to tackle this??

How do you see yourself as a disciple? As salt of the earth or light of the world? (Mt 5:13, 14). How can we be better at both?

# 1. Distinctive Discipleship

Reading: Matthew 4:18-22; 5:1-2; 8:18-22

All four gospels record the calling of disciples. Indeed, the call of individuals to God's service is a recurring feature throughout the whole Bible, from Noah and Abraham onwards. This shows us clearly that God communicates with and operates in his world in relationship or covenant with people. The Bible is divided up into two sections which relate God's calling and working through certain people – the Old and the New Covenants or Testaments. What distinguishes the old from the new is not just history but the final revelation of God's purpose to offer relationship or covenant with people through his Son, Jesus.

So what does being called to be God's disciple by Jesus mean for us? That all four gospels narrate Jesus calling disciples surely indicates, not just the will of God for those individuals then, but also for the on-going work of the Church as the People of God.

Matthew's account of the call of the first four disciples is placed right at the start of Jesus' public ministry. In Mt 4:17, Jesus began preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near". 'Repent' means to review one's outlook and be prepared to change one's mind and, consequently, one's life. Gospel writer Matthew then places his narrative of Jesus calling his first disciples right after Jesus' appeal to "repent". Matthew wants to demonstrate to his readers, who now include us, that responding positively to Jesus' call to follow him is the correct way to "repent". Jesus is looking not for people to initiate some self-help reform programme but to go to him and him alone to achieve this. It's something which we cannot do all on our own. Unless we look to Jesus, unless we commit to follow him, then we are in a mess from which there is no escape.

When examining the call of the disciples in Matthew we see two distinct parts to it:

1. The Call
2. The Response

1. The Call

Jesus does not call people to be his disciples by telling them to implement a series of philosophical propositions or a rule book. Although there is teaching and there are rules and laws, the call to be a Christian disciple is not to be philosophical or a law-abiding person (although it can include that). There are plenty of agnostics and atheists who fit those categories. No, Jesus calls people to follow **him**. Ask a cross-section of people what they mean by 'Christian' and they will give a range of answers. Few will give the correct one – a Christian is a follower of Jesus the Christ. For the first disciples, following Jesus, meant that literally and physically. They went to him, they followed him around, learning from him by imitation and taking in his actions and words.

2. The Response

In Mt 4:20 and 4:22 Matthew describes the key and progressive steps we need to take to respond to Jesus' call:

- 'at once' (v20), 'immediately' (v22) – same Greek word used. Obedience and prompt response are hallmarks of Christian discipleship. How many people even today put off making a decision to follow Jesus on account of other demands and priorities? To respond 'at once' means that committing to following Jesus has been given top priority.
- 'they left' (vv20, 22). To be a disciple of Jesus is to accept that one has to decide where one belongs – in the world with its people in rebellion against the Lord, or in relationship with God through Jesus. The call to discipleship is a call to leave the world's standards and desires, to choose to live a life that is separate and clearly distinctive, set apart. Not to be physically separate but to base one's beliefs,

morals and standards on what God has revealed and not on what the world chooses for the moment. For these first four disciples, they had to leave their nets and their father. Discipleship demands putting Jesus first, before possessions, other commitments and other relationships. Glib offers to “follow you wherever you go”, like that made by the teacher of the law (Mt 8:19), can be said in the excitement of the moment. Jesus reminds us, as he did that teacher of the law, that he (as the soon-to-suffer Son of Man) “has nowhere to lay his head” (Mt 8:20). If Jesus was to suffer rejection, hardship and worse, then any who choose to follow him as disciples must expect similar treatment and experience, and should bear this in mind before they commit to him.

In Mt 5:1 – 2, Matthew introduces Jesus’ first main teaching, what is called ‘The Sermon on the Mount’. Matthew’s introduction to the sermon is important because it illustrates further the meaning of following by separation. In Mt 4:25 we read that “large crowds...followed him”. Why? Were they responding as disciples should? No. They were following Jesus because of what they might receive from him – “healing every disease and sickness among the people” (4:23). They sought quick fixes for their physical and psychological ailments, not inner transformation leading to a saved relationship with God through faith in Jesus. Matthew informs us that, although Jesus spent much time with “the crowds”, he also challenged people to be distinctive. In Mt 5:1 Jesus saw the crowds that had been following and pestering him. He had given them his time and attention, but now he himself separated from the crowds and “went up on a mountainside”. He then “sat down”. Jesus, through his actions of separating from the crowds and sitting down, gave a clear message to the people.

Although “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (Jn 3:16), this Son would challenge people to decide for him or the world. What ‘the crowds’ stand for in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, ‘the world’ represents in John’s gospel. The crowds were those who were largely leaderless, those who, like most mobs, force and push in all directions, lacking clear purpose and function. The crowds represent our and any worldly culture and society which is founded on humanist principles and mores which are relative and ever changing. Notice that the first four disciples are still part of that crowd, despite their initial response to follow Jesus and leave behind certain things. The call of peer pressure is strong. Yet Jesus has sat down. Not just for a rest after climbing the steep hills on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. He has sat down in the traditional pose of a teacher or rabbi. His actions challenge the crowds to make up their minds. They have been happy with following Jesus when they could obtain material benefits. What about now? Do they also want the cost of committing to follow him as God’s Son with God’s message? Matthew informs us that at this point, “the disciples came to him” (Mt 5:1b). They had made up their mind. They had decided to commit wholeheartedly to following Jesus, which now included being open to his teaching on what discipleship entailed.

We too face the same decision. Do we follow the crowds or the world which will ultimately reject Jesus and his divine demands? Do we follow Jesus because of what we think we can get from him without surrendering ourselves to him? Or will we leave the crowds and put commitment to following Jesus as our number one priority? Only when we come to Jesus with that level of surrender and obedience can we be open to his leading and teaching in the way of discipleship. After calling disciples, Jesus offers them teaching. They need to learn and keep on learning, for Christian discipleship is a life-long journey of growing maturity in Christ.

## 2. Discipleship: Having the BE ATTITUDE

### Reading: Matthew 5:3-12

When the disciples made their decision to leave the crowds and follow Jesus, they came to Jesus as their teacher. His teaching, which we call The Sermon on the Mount, is therefore for committed disciples only. It is not teaching or advice for the general public or the crowds. It is distinctive teaching for disciples on how to live distinctive Christian lives. Christian teacher John Stott calls this distinctiveness the Christian 'counter culture', for much of the Christian disciple's attitudes and behaviour have to reflect an approach to life, a culture that is at great variance to the contemporary culture in which we live. So let us understand the Beatitudes as Jesus calling us to live by the **BE ATTITUDE**, where these **ATTITUDES** can **BE** seen by others in our everyday Christian living.

The sayings commonly termed "the Beatitudes" form a coherent and progressive description of how the Christian disciple's attitude must contrast considerably with that of the non-Christian world. "Blessed" can appear to be a vague, warm and fuzzy wish. The word used by Matthew means "be happy" and the GNB actually has this translation. It represents, not some superficial wish for improvement based on changed circumstances, but an inner contentment and well-being, irrespective of situation.

Most people want to be happy, but their list would not match Jesus' non-materialistic qualities and attitudes here. The Beatitudes describe eight ingredients that will be true of each person who is 'happy'. The list is progressive. Once completed, Jesus then says to that 'happy' person – "you are salt/light" (vv13, 14).

**Beatitude 1** "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (v3)

The first step to real happiness as a Christian disciple is acknowledgement of spiritual poverty, the recognition that we do not have what it takes to be the person we were created to be. As Paul expressed it personally in Romans 7:18, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out". Once recognised and admitted, however, Jesus says that we can come under the blessings of living within the kingly rule of God.

**Beatitude 2** "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (v4)

To recognise our poverty in spirit is to mourn that poverty. This is the logical response to admitting our own inability to set ourselves right with God. The only honest way forward is this acknowledgement of our sin and to repent. Once admitted (mourned), we will be comforted by God the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, who comes alongside (Paraclete, Jn 16:7) in power to replace all that we are with all that he is.

**Beatitude 3** "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (v5).

Meekness is the inevitable consequence of being aware of our poverty of spirit, and mourning that poverty. Being meek is not being weak or spineless. Rather it is being submissive to Christ as Lord. The lordship of Christ in the life of the disciple is not an optional extra but an indispensable ingredient. Of the meek, Jesus says that "they will inherit the earth". The crowds/unbelieving world cannot understand this. They associate inheriting the world with power, force and wealth.

If the first three Beatitudes address the key issues we must come to terms with to become Christian disciples, the next three point to the essential evidence we should expect and exhibit.

**Beatitude 4** "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (v6).

Righteousness is not some pious stance, but behaviour, doing right. The only valid evidence of the fullness of Jesus in a person's life is their behaviour. It is not the cause (for that would be justification by works), but the consequent expression of his fullness. The desire to be like Christ in moral character and conduct gives proof of his presence in our lives.

Note that Jesus did not say "Blessed are those who **are** righteous", but "Blessed are those who **hunger/long for** righteousness". The evidence of Jesus in a person's life is not they are righteous but that they have a desire for it. To face up to our poverty of spirit, to mourn and submit meekly to Jesus as Lord, is the source of an

appetite for righteousness, to be right with him. From that comes a deep sense of satisfaction, for Jesus said, “they will be filled” with what Christ offers.

**Beatitude 5** “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (v7).

One of the expressions of a hunger for righteousness is mercy. This too is a ‘must be’ mark of a Christian disciple. Not “blessed are those who are shown mercy” for the Christian must show mercy regardless of how others treat them. The condition to receiving from God is giving, seen, for example, in Jesus’ prayer in Mt 6:12 (the Lord’s Prayer), “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”.

**Beatitude 6** “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (v8).

‘Pure’ here means ‘being clean’. The word used has the sense of being unmixed with other things, as in our English phrase, “pure and unadulterated”. So here, Jesus means not being perfect in heart, but being “single-minded”, as the psalmist said in psalm 86:11, “give me an undivided heart”. Such a disposition will enable the disciple to focus on God and not be easily distracted.

So, the first three Beatitudes speak of the foundation of Christian experience. The next three describe the characteristics of that experience. Now the last two speak of the fruits or impact of Christian experience. What kind of impact is this Beatitude-full person – us even – going to make on the crowds/world?

**Beatitude 7** “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (v9).

The disciple is to be a peacemaker. Not like the UN peacemakers, for what is wrong with the world is not situations, it’s you and me. As James wrote in his letter (4:1), “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” To be a Christian peacemaker is not to impose just some structure on the symptoms, but to go to the source. People are alienated from God. It is reconciliation with God that brings peace with God. Once we come to peace with God through Christ, we can share the means of peace with others. Then we become peacemakers, reconcilers – “All this is from God”, wrote Paul, “who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). When we share the message of “peace through [Christ’s] blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:20), one of two things may happen: there will be those who respond positively and come to peace with Jesus, or there will be those who react negatively and persecute.

**Beatitude 8** “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v10).

To be an active witness to Jesus will lead to persecution. Jesus wants his disciples – us included – to appreciate this fact. So he expands on the generic Beatitude with a more specific one in vv11 – 12. And how is the disciple to respond? With revenge and get mad? No. With “rejoice and be glad”! Two reasons are given:

- We’re in good company, for so “they persecuted the prophets who were before you”, and
- “great is your reward in heaven”.

Persecution has often had a positive effect on the church. Tertullian, an early Church leader, wrote, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed [for growth] of the church”. Persecution is never God’s choice, as it is the result of evil intent, but God is never out-manoeuvred by it.

### 3. Salt and Light Discipleship

Reading: Matthew 5:13-16; Mark 9:50; Colossians 4:5 – 6; Luke 11:33-36; John 12:35-36a; Romans 13:11-14; Ephesians 5:5-14; 1 John 1:5-7; 2:9-11

One might be led to think from some of the Beatitudes that talk of disciples being rewarded with the kingdom of heaven points to them being only fit for heaven. That would be wrong, very wrong. Jesus goes on now to offer teaching that grounds the disciple's life and work very firmly in this world. Jesus' disciples, including us, are called as a consequence of the Beatitude attitude, to be visible disciples. Both salt and light affect their environment.

With these two simple metaphors, Jesus describes the impact of the disciple on the world. Christians are to be visible, both as individuals and as part of the Christian community, the church. So when we mix with the crowds, the world (remember this means the non-Christian world), we are to be alert to the opportunities to be salt and light – with our unbelieving relatives and friends, neighbours and work colleagues. Other New Testament teaching illustrates this further. As Christian disciples, our conversation should be “seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4:6), so that we can “make the most of every opportunity” to share the gospel with non-Christians. Jesus is always our example; he is the Light bringing God's truth so we can learn from him and become “sons of light” before others (Jn 12:36a). The light of Jesus, which comes from God, not only illuminates us, but also protects us like “armour” (Romans 13:12) and enables us to “behave decently” (Romans 13:13).

To “live as children of light” means not just doing the right, but also knowing the difference between light and darkness, right and wrong. As Paul puts it, “have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them” (Ephesians 5:8,11). So we should seek opportunities to live out those Beatitudes as we share Jesus; to be distinctive Christians in our everyday living, taking our standards from Jesus, not the ever changing ones of the world. Salt should bring out the best in the flavour and wholesomeness of food as well as preserving it so that it is good and nutritious. In a similar way, Christian disciples should exert a wholesome influence in the community.

Sometimes we hear people, even some within the Church, say “we must move with the times”, when attitudes or policies are changed, usually challenging Biblical teaching and principles. As John Stott wrote, “God intends the most powerful of all restraints within sinful society to be his own redeemed, regenerate and righteous people” (The Message of the Sermon on the Mount, p59). Or as R V G Tasker put it, Christians are “to be a moral disinfectant in a world where moral standards are low, constantly changing, or non-existent” (quoted in op cit p59). So if we claim to be Jesus' disciples, how are we living up to this part of the job specification?

In the light of that, let us be aware of the stark warning Jesus gives at this point to every disciple: “if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men”. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his *The Cost of Discipleship*, commenting on the Sermon on the Mount, “that is the judgement which always hangs over the disciple community, whose mission is to save the world, but which, if it ceases to live up to that mission, is itself irretrievably lost. The call of Jesus Christ means either that we are salt of the earth, or else we are annihilated; either we follow the call or we are crushed beneath it” (p105). Discipleship is not an option open for some Christians to take up. It is the consequence for all who respond to Jesus' call.

## 4. Discipleship and the Bible

Reading: Matthew 5:17-24, 27-28, 38-39, 43-48; Luke 24:44

For Jews, the most important part of their Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament) is the Torah, the Law or Teaching, found in the first five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). That section contains some 613 laws or commandments which faithful Jews are supposed to keep. But what about Christians? Should we have daily tick lists of these 613 laws and see how we keep them? Do the laws, indeed, does the **whole** Old Testament still apply to us? Is it God's inspired Word for us now? This is a big issue. Some Christians write off much of the Old Testament as irrelevant, even bloodthirsty and nasty, seeing the God of the ancient Israelites as very different from the loving God of the New Testament.

Let's focus on the main issue of the importance of scripture, especially the Old Testament, for Christians today. If we want to be Jesus' disciples, then we have to follow his lead on what the scriptures mean and what their function should be today. Immediately after Jesus told his disciples to be salt and light, he went on to show them what being salt and light meant in practice. And he did this by referring to the continuing applicability of **ALL** the scriptures. However, he did this by telling his followers that **HE** is the key to understanding and then applying the Old Testament. Those ancient scriptures should not function as a list of do's and don'ts. Christian discipleship is not a religion, based on a manual of DIY instructions to follow and then sit back, full of self congratulation and self satisfaction of a job well done. That was the "righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law". No, said Jesus, "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20). Another stark warning from Jesus!

So if Jesus does not mean by that that Christians should be even more tick list minded than those very religious Jews, then what does he mean? His opening comment in this section points the way to an answer: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them" (Mt 5:17). "The Law and the Prophets" is a phrase that refers to the first two main sections of the Hebrew Bible. So Jesus is not just referring to a list of laws and prophetic teaching, but in effect to the whole of the scriptures used by the first Christians, way before any of the New Testament books were produced. 'Fulfilment' is the key to understanding the relationship between Jesus and the scriptures. To fulfil is to fill the sacred writings with meaning, relevance and application. The real meaning of the scriptures, Jesus is saying, lies in himself, his identity, his relationship with God the Father. The scriptures point to and find their completion and ultimate application in Jesus. So to follow Jesus' way of understanding and applying the sacred texts is **the** way for the Christian disciple. This explains why Matthew uses the concept of Jesus fulfilling scripture as a key feature of his presentation of the person and work of Jesus. He uses a set formula, eg "this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet..." (Mt 1:22). Gospel writer Luke also shows how Jesus taught his disciples after the resurrection how to understand his true divine nature by interpreting his life in light of the whole Old Testament (Lk 24:44). Like Matthew, Luke refers to Jesus' use of the fulfilment concept. "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms".

The Old Testament is still relevant because it is about Jesus. Jesus is not just found in the New Testament! Notice here that Jesus has added to what Matthew recorded in Matthew 5:17 by the inclusion of "and the Psalms". The order of books in the Hebrew Bible varies in places from the Christian Old Testament. The third section of the Hebrew Bible, often called "The Writings", begins with the book of Psalms, so Jesus is here saying that all three parts of the Hebrew Bible point to him and find their fulfilment in him. Jesus also makes another important point. He says, "everything **must** be fulfilled". "Must" here is a word that appears elsewhere in the gospels, especially when Jesus talks about his forthcoming passion, death and resurrection. "Must" refers to the divine necessity that these things should happen. So in Lk 24:44, Jesus is not giving a religious teacher's interpretation of the relationship between himself and the Old Testament. As the Son of God, Jesus claims divine authority for saying that the whole of the scriptures, God's written Word, point to him, the Word made flesh.

So the key to interpreting the Old Testament texts and their relevance for the Christian disciple is the proper understanding of who Jesus is. Jesus does not come teaching that the Old Testament laws must be rigidly, 'religiously' followed, for that would turn Christianity into a religion of human effort, justification by works. Nor does he overturn the Old Testament as irrelevant and replace it with his own set of principles. Instead, he presents himself as God's Son, as the One to whom the scriptures point and find their fulfilment and ultimate meaning. The Christian, to be a disciple of Jesus, has to accept this. To reject this approach is to reject Jesus, and to reject Jesus is to reject God's initiative of grace.

That Jesus is no mere religious teacher explaining the Old Testament's role for Christians is seen in the amazing language he uses when talking about the scriptures and himself. Again and again he repeats the phrase, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, '...'. But I tell you" (eg Mt 5:21f). The first part refers to the teaching or commandment in the Old Testament. For Jesus, this is still valid because it was given by God and has not been withdrawn by God. However, the next part, "but I tell you" shows us Jesus bringing his authority to the scripture. The authority of God in giving the scripture in the first place is paralleled by Jesus' authority to interpret that scripture. This can only be acceptable if Jesus is divine. No human teacher or leader could do that without committing blasphemy. This is the ultimate key to studying the scriptures as part of our discipleship journey. Whatever Jesus says about the Law or other parts of the Old Testament has to be understood in the light of who Jesus really is – the Son of God. He gives life to the scriptures because he is the living Word of God, speaking with divine authority. That is why Jesus says what he does about the laws. Not that they are now superseded, rather that their core meaning is brought out by Jesus who is the author of the scripture in the first place!

### **Conclusion**

So, to conclude, the Christian disciple is called to live distinctively by:

1. Following Jesus, not the crowds, nor the current culture;
2. Having the Beatitude attitude which is the very opposite of much of our contemporary materialistic society;
3. Applying this attitude through an extraordinary lifestyle of a visible Christian witness to the non-Christian world; and
4. Realising how Jesus is the key to understanding and applying God's written Word today.