

**Basics of the Faith: Discipleship**  
**Matthew 10: 24-39**  
***June 21, 2020***

What are the implications for us if we become disciples of Jesus Christ? What indeed does it mean to be a disciple or follower of Jesus? What are our responsibilities in this role of disciple? What are the possible consequences if we choose this path? Will it create a challenge to our loyalty to others, even within our own families? All of these questions come up in this Matthew passage.

Early in Matthew we read about the calling of the first disciples, Peter and Andrew, followed by James and John. Later he calls Matthew. In each case he invites them to follow him. That is all that is said about these interactions. It is only when we arrive at chapter 10 and the sending out of the 12 that we read the broader implications of following Jesus. That broader context is Jesus teaching on what it will mean to be a disciple or follower. Their mission is to go out to the villages of Galilee teaching, preaching and healing. They are warned that they are going to face opposition; they will be like sheep sent out amid wolves. Conflict will not be merely with the governing elite, but will reach into the heart of families.

He says: *brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. (Matthew 10:21ff)*

Well now that is a pretty high demand for a follower! We will all pause, take a breath, and think long and hard about what this might mean for us 21<sup>st</sup> century followers.

It's so easy to forget this central point of the Christian message. One of the dangers we face as an institution is losing sight of the original calling to be bearers of this good news. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the mainline churches reach the height of power and influence in society and developed as a consequence what has been termed *civic faith*.

A book released in 2005, ***Soul Searching***, by Smith and Denton, looked at the role of religion in American teens. The authors did extensive nation-wide study by phone and personal interviews. The

results showed that religion and spirituality were indeed very significant in the lives of many American teenagers. The authors called their belief system, *moralistic therapeutic deism*. The author's study found that many young people believe in several moral statutes not exclusive to any of the major world religions. It is not a new religion as such, but identified as a set of commonly held spiritual beliefs.

And here is a summary of what this term means:

1. A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem
5. Good people go to heaven when they die

What is troubling about this study is that it may reflect the culture as a whole, not merely teens in America. Dr. R Albert Mohler Jr. writing on this study argues that these beliefs are not restricted to teens, but are the beliefs of the general population: *It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people.* The study goes on: *Furthermore, this deity does not challenge the most basic self-centered assumptions of our postmodern age. Particularly when it comes to so-called "lifestyle" issues, this God is exceedingly tolerant and this religion is radically undemanding... As sociologists, Smith and his team suggest that this Moralistic Therapeutic Deism may now constitute something like a dominant civil religion that constitutes the belief system for the culture at large. Thus, this basic conception may be analogous to what other researchers have identified as "lived religion" as experienced by the mainstream culture.* And perhaps the most frightening part of this is: *They argue that this distortion of Christianity has taken root not only in the minds of individuals, but also "within the structures of at least some Christian organizations and institutions."* Finally, he says: *Millions of Americans believe they are Christians, simply because*

*they have some historic tie to a Christian denomination or identity.* Finally, another study I read noted: *Does this mean that America is becoming more secularized? Not necessarily. These researchers assert that Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.*

I'm sure few of us at West Flamboro entertain these ideas at least not knowingly! But I believe that *moralistic therapeutic deism* has found its way into our thinking and practices, surreptitiously and gradually. For over half a century we had assumed the role as guardians of morality and emphasized civic duty and respectability as our core message. These broad themes of moralistic theism are worlds away from the message of the New Testament on discipleship. We have no doubt paid a price for this wandering away from the demanding, life-changing commitment Jesus asked his followers to accept. It has weakened our commitment to the historic Christian message and its teaching on discipleship and evangelism.

The consistent message of Jesus was that he came into the world to seek out and save the lost. The church, the people of God, is to continue this mission of making disciples and teaching them what that means. That is our task, our priority, our agenda.

Such a mission may seem overwhelming and frightening to many of us. It was obviously no less so for these disciples. So, Jesus now turns to address these fears. He is sending them out, he says, *like sheep into the midst of wolves*. Hence, they are to be *wise as serpents and harmless as doves*. They require this wisdom because there will be opposition to their message and perhaps even persecution. And for many Christians throughout the world this remains a reality: persecution, imprisonment, and even death. But because God's Spirit is within this community they are not to fear.

Within our context our issues are not so much about physical danger, but rather apathy, theological fuzziness on the nature of our identity and calling, and our lack of confidence in the power of the Gospel to transform. Mainline congregations found it easier to circle the wagons, so to speak, and look after our declining numbers. Decline breeds insecurity and anxiety about the future. In such a climate so

many of our churches have resisted change and have adopted an inward focus. This has led to weakened congregations and for many churches has resulted in closure.

The church must never act merely as a humanitarian organization; while we look after the needs in our communities and beyond it is always done in the name of Christ. We may discover that, like the woman at the well under the hot noonday sun, they will ask not merely for water, but for spiritual life. It may seem like a fuzzy line between humanitarian deeds of mercy and Christian outreach, but there is a difference. Christian ministry reaches out to the whole person, body and spirit.

There is no need for conflict on this matter of whether we address the needs of the body or the spirit. Christ calls us to do both. Many of you may have seen the film **Amazing Grace**, the story of Wilberforce and his battle against the slave trade. He saw it as his Christian duty to address the systemic evil of the slave trade, not merely to address the spiritual needs of those involved. Building God realm on earth means we must address social injustice and physical needs as well as spiritual hunger. Remember the song in the film **Chariots of Fire** based on William Blake's poem:

*Bring me my Bow of burning gold;  
Bring me my Arrows of desire:  
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold:  
Bring me my Chariot of fire!  
I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,  
Till we have built Jerusalem,  
In England's green & pleasant Land.*

This is our task, to work to bring about God's kingdom on earth. It is what Christ has called the church to do, to continue his ministry on earth. Disciples are people called out by grace to follow Jesus into every corner of their lives. My faith cannot be isolated into some private spiritual corner of my soul. Discipleship is now at the core of who I am, in spite of family background, education and social status.

Jesus ends his instructions with the warning that his coming will not guarantee peace. The reception of the Gospel divides families. Has this proven true for you?

My three brothers were, like me, not raised within a Christian home. My oldest brother, Ernest, became a Christian when he arrived in Canada through the witness of his landlady. You could say that she served as a true disciple of Jesus by sharing her faith. Through Ernest I too became a disciple of Jesus when I arrived in Canada. So, you could say that, because of the landlady's commitment to live out her discipleship, two brothers became Christians. My other two brothers, who stayed in Scotland, remained outside the influence of church. Indeed, Nicol, who died seven years ago, and with whom I spent a lot of time during my teens, became decidedly hostile to the church. My youngest brother, many of you met when he joined us last summer for the baptism service at West Flamboro for my two grandchildren from Japan. He too has chosen to remain outside any faith commitment.

I may have told you about my aunt Ruby who I looked up to among all my aunts. When I became a Christian, she wrote me a stern letter asking me to stop all this Christian stuff and go back to the way I was before I left Scotland. Even my own mother seemed somewhat bewildered by my choice of faith and ministry. So yes, even within our own families we can experience some measure of misunderstanding and rejection.

Jesus puts it pretty boldly here: *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*

At a personal level he ends with this troubling statement: *Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.* It sounds contradictory, but is it? Certainly, our society would tell us that this is simply not true. Their message is that those who are successful are the happy ones, the ones who enlarge themselves through money, possessions and status. Jesus way is very different. Which school of thought have you bought into? Which is working for you? Did society lie? What choice have you made?

In our serving we will discover freedom. Jesus promised that whoever believes in him will be free indeed. Being born into a family of love and grace through faith is a beautiful gift. And as we live out this new identity as disciples of Jesus, we discover a new family that shares a common life and task. The truth and reality are that my Christian family of faith is one I have so much more in common than I do with my family of origin.

Remember when told that his mother and brothers were outside and wanting to speak to him, Jesus responded: *Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. (Matthew 12:46ff)*

**Amen**