

# The Demands of Discipleship

by Walton Weaver

The word “discipleship” does not appear in our New Testament, but the word “disciple” is an often used term. We read of the disciples of Moses (Jn. 9:28), John the Baptist (Matt. 11:2; Mk. 2:18; Lk. 11:1), the Pharisees (Matt. 22:16; Mk. 2:18). and Jesus (Matt. 13:36, Lk. 11:1, Jn. 6:12, 16, 22, 24, 60-61, etc., “his disciples,” and Jn. 7:3, “your disciples”; but sometimes simply identified as “the disciples” [Matt. 13:10]). Jesus called men to be his disciples and to follow him. Those who chose to follow him and learn from him were his disciples. His disciples often called him “Rabbi,” which means, “teacher” (Mk. 9:5; 11:21; Jn. 1:38; 4:31). Even those who had not yet decided to follow him sometimes addressed him in this way (Jn. 3:2), showing that he was generally recognized to be a Rabbi, or teacher, among the Jews. He taught and discussed like one (Mk. 12:18ff.), and was asked to make legal decisions (Lk. 12:13ff.).

Jesus never seemed to think that the crowds would follow him. There is no indication that he ever thought in terms of numbers, or how many would actually heed his call to follow him and become his disciples. He never tried to make it appear easy to be one of his disciples. He always pointed to the difficulties that would stand in the way. He asked men to count the cost in advance lest they begin to follow him and then turn back (Lk. 14:25-32). One who starts and then turns back, he said, is not “fit for the kingdom of God” (Lk. 9:57-62). So how much would it cost to be a disciple of Jesus? What were the demands that he placed upon those whom he invited to come and follow after him? Let’s take a look at a general statement of Jesus’ demands of discipleship as given in Matthew 16:24-25.

## Willing Acceptance

Jesus begins by showing that enlistment is strictly on a voluntary basis: “If anyone *desires* to come after Me. . .” (NKJV). God’s dealings with man has ever been on this basis. Any improvement brought about by God in man is brought about through moral persuasion, or through teaching. “It is written in the prophets, ‘*And they shall all be taught by God.*’ Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me” (Jn.. 6:45). Only those who had heard Jesus and learned from him were expected to come. But one had to begin following Jesus to become one of his disciples. Desire alone was not enough. Jesus said,; “*desires to COME* after Me.” This required a willing *response*. One had first to make the decision that this was what he wanted to do, then he had to make the move of actually beginning to following Jesus. Salvation is strictly on a voluntary basis, and all who desire to be saved must come and follow after Jesus. “And whoever *DESIRE*S, let him *TAKE* of the waters of life freely” (Rev. 22:17). The call is open to all: “if *ANYONE* desires to come after Me,” and “*WHOEVER* desires, let him take . . .” Every accountable person who is willing to meet the demands of discipleship may become a disciple of Jesus.

## Self-Denial

The second demand of discipleship is that one is willing to “deny himself.” Not deny

certain things to himself, but deny himself. Many think Jesus means that we must deny ourselves of sinful pleasures, love of family more than Jesus, too much time on the job, the love of money, etc., but these are only by-products of what Jesus demands in this statement. To deny self is not the denial of anything, little or big, to self, but the denial *of self*. It is denying our right to ourselves—denying that we own ourselves. A true disciple denies the right to make decisions for himself. He acknowledges that he belongs to another (see 1 Cor. 6:19-20). When we have denied self we often will find that it is not best to peruse or engage in some things that would be allowable, and all things obviously sinful will be shunned. But it is the self denial — getting self out of the way — that has made this possible.

A life of self denial involves putting Christ in the center of our lives. It is the turning away from self to Christ, from one center to another. Paul found this to be the secret for living successfully as a follower of Christ. “It is no longer I who live,” he says, “but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). It is putting our focus on Christ, allowing our thinking and our way of life to be centered on him, rather than on self.

According to the Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:23, just a couple of verses below our text, this was the problem Peter had when he said of Jesus’ prediction that he must soon be put to death. “Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You.” Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.” (v. 23). How direct! How blunt! But like many others of his day, Peter’s mind was filled with preconceptions. What he wanted Christ to be was far from what Jesus’ words about his coming death would allow. Peter found his way of thinking about what Christ and his kingdom would be like that it was difficult for him to change. He had much to learn yet about the cross, as well as the meaning of taking up one’s own cross. He clearly did not yet understand how Jesus’ mission was to involve his own death on a cross and how self denial would demand a cross if one is to be a disciple of Jesus.

## **Taking Up One’s Cross**

So what does the next demand of discipleship, that one must “take up his cross,” mean? The disciples must have wondered about that when they heard these words. And many people still show a lack of understanding when they think by “cross” Jesus means a trial, hardship, or some handicap they must endure. They often say, “This is my cross!” But the cross was a means of execution, and when a person took up his cross in the first century Roman-world, he was carrying it to his death. So Jesus meant, to by my disciple you must die for me, die to yourself.

This death to one’s self is the only way to find real life, as Jesus shows in v. 25: “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” Paul shows he had learned this great lesson when he says, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). Jesus’ disciples did not yet understand, but they would understand later.

## **Follow Jesus**

The final demand of discipleship is to “follow Me,” Jesus said. Sadly, many professed disciples of Jesus do not follow him. What does it mean to follow Jesus? It means to obey him.

There is no subject that is stressed more in Jesus' own teaching. "If you love Me, keep my commandments" (Jn. 15:14), he said to his disciples. Again, "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you" (Jn. 15:14). This is what discipleship means. It involves following Jesus wherever he would lead us. That is choosing to do what he commands and looking to him to help us carry through successfully.

The tense of each of these three verbs is continuous: "keep on denying yourself, keep on taking up your cross, keep on following me." This program for discipleship is not just for the moment. It is the program of a lifetime.

## **Conclusion**

As a reminder of a point we made in the outset, Joe Schubert has given a good summary statement that will serve well as a fitting conclusion to this brief study of the demands of discipleship as laid out in these two verses::

These words are strong and demanding and must have struck the disciples with a solemn and serious impact. We, like the apostles, can always be grateful that the Lord has never invited anyone to come to Him without letting them know what would be involved. He told them straight from the shoulder what they would be getting into. He is not interested in anyone becoming a Christian on false terms. He makes this very clear right from the start.