

Knowing God Through Discipleship

There is a legend of Alexander the Great attacking a great, walled and fortified city. He did not have a huge army, and after approaching the city, Alexander raised his voice and called for the king of the city to come to the city walls. When he did, Alexander demanded that the king and his city surrender to Alexander and his small army. The king looked at this rather insignificant band of men, and laughed. He mocked Alexander, telling him that his tiny army could do no harm to such a fortified city. Alexander then called on the king and his leaders to watch a demonstration. He ordered his men to line up in single file, and marched off to a nearby cliff. From the walls, the king and the townspeople watched, absorbed. Alexander gave the order, and his men began marching off the cliff to their deaths. After ten soldiers had died, Alexander called the rest of his men to his side. He returned to the city. Seeing this, the city immediately surrendered. If Alexander's troops were willing to march off a cliff for their general, nothing would prevent their eventual victory over the city.

That kind of commitment is not often found. Occasionally some military leader, or political figure, or religious leader gains such total loyalty and commitment. But there is only one person who has won that kind of loyalty and commitment, not through arms, fear, money, or manipulation, but through self-sacrifice, love, and wise teaching – Jesus Christ. Christians are truly meant to be followers with the kind of loyalty and commitment that Alexander's men had. And indeed, in two thousand years, millions of Christians have showed exactly that kind of commitment, being willing to die for Christ.

To put it another way, true believers are disciples, radical, cross-carrying followers of the Master. For the last few weeks, we've been considering the idea of knowing God. In this series, we've considered knowing God on several fronts. We've considered the five secrets of knowing God. We looked at knowing God in worship, and knowing God in fellowship. Today we want to consider discipleship: how we know God through discipleship.

A Christian disciple is really characterised by three things:

His commitment to follow; his conformity to his master; and his desire to see more conversions to Christ. This morning, I want us to consider discipleship from the angle of knowing God. How does discipleship cause us to know God better?

I. Knowing Christ Through Commitment

Whenever Jesus speaks of discipleship, He speaks about commitment.

Luke 9:57-62 ⁵⁷ Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." ⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." ⁵⁹ Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." ⁶⁰ Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." ⁶¹ And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." ⁶² But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Luke 14:26-27 ²⁶ "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. ²⁷ "And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

Luke 14:33 ³³ "So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.

The kind of commitment that Jesus speaks of here is a commitment that challenges you at the very root of your being. You can be committed to all kinds of things: a career, a charitable cause, a sport, a hobby. But in most cases, your commitment to those things goes only so far. The claim that such a thing has on you is only so tight. If things more important to you – health and life, family, and so on come into conflict with that other commitment, it goes.

But the commitment Jesus calls for here is an ultimate kind of commitment. It's a commitment willing to give up home and comfort, to sever or change family ties, to leave an old life entirely behind. It is a commitment that actually causes you to act as if your own life is dead. Here is a commitment that you can no longer control, and shape to suit yourself. This commitment demands all of you, to the point that you no longer own the commitment, the commitment owns you.

This is what it means to follow Christ as a disciple. Radical ultimate commitment.

How is it that this kind of commitment leads me to know Christ better? When you commit like this, it sifts out our priorities. When Jesus gave those hard answers to those people, He was not trying to be mean. He was trying to expose the layer of selfishness and pride that they thought was compatible with following Christ. They thought they could please two masters, and Christ wanted to show them it could not be done. That's an act of mercy. It's Christ showing a man that there is a cataract in his spiritual eyes. Some idol of selfishness: money, success, fame, family, material comfort, health, is sitting between him and Christ. It's stifling healthy communion. It's shutting out the light of Christ. It's a veil on the spiritual eyes.

What God did with Abraham was very similar. By challenging Abraham to give up Isaac, who was most dear to him, Abraham was confronted with what was dearest to him.

One of the ways Christ seeks deeper communion with us is by challenging us to this level of commitment, because at that point, our priorities are exposed. People don't always like this approach by our Lord. They would prefer He gently coax them into commitment, sweetly inviting them to slightly more commitment, like acclimatising to a cold swimming pool, inch by inch. And to the secular ear, used to personal autonomy, personal freedoms, the rights of the individual, this all sound extreme, oppressive.

But God knows how we work. And when we kick and scream, we only show again that it does work. Our loves are being exposed.

What happens to the Christian who chooses to make that extra commitment? What happens to the Christian who identifies some part of her life she is still clinging to, nursing, keeping Christ, and chooses to give it up? What happens to the Christian who steps up his commitment, who becomes more purposeful, more zealous, more committed to seeking Christ?

Well, ask Mary after she broke that alabaster box and gave up a year's salary on Jesus' feet. Ask Nicodemus, after he was willing to go public with his faith. Ask any of those that Revelation 12 describes as those who *did not love their lives to the death*.

Do you think they were filled with joy, or with regret? With less communion or more? Those who are willing to walk the Calvary Road find Christ with them. Those who are ready with a gift of deeper commitment will find Christ present to receive it. Those giving up father, mother, comforts, lands, find Christ there to more than console and more than repay with Himself.

I remember a young man around fifteen years old who overslept on Sunday mornings, and occasionally went to church on Sunday nights. He popped his head in the door at the youth group, but even that became sporadic. He came to church in a tracksuit and not many could get him to get serious. I remember that young man well, because he was me. I had no encouragement to go to church from my unbelieving family, and little else in my life to compel me to go, except the prompting of the Spirit. Everything changed when, at a youth camp, I was challenged by a message calling for commitment. I changed everything. I went whenever the church met. I got involved in ministry. I even changed what I wore. Though going to church more often did not make me more spiritual, the very act of committing deeply, making time sacrifices, ordering my weekly routine around God, not expecting God to fit into mine, this profoundly changed me, in a way that never went back. I came to know Christ deeper and better than ever before, and it happened through commitment.

None of us can make an ultimate commitment in one day. We don't even know all the parts of our lives that need to be committed. But what you can do is when God identifies an area of your life that needs to be surrendered, or changed, or removed so as to better follow Christ - then do it. The reward of knowing Him better is waiting for those who take up the discipleship call of commitment.

Discipleship is not only commitment, discipleship is conformity.

II. Knowing Christ Through Conformity

Hebrews 12:14 ¹⁴ *Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:*

What does a disciple do? A disciple follows. We who do not see Christ physically before us as the twelve disciples did, therefore what does it mean to follow Christ? It means to be like Him. It means to follow His ways, His character. It means we imitate Him in His loves and desires, and actions, and priorities.

Matthew 10:25 *"It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master.*

Discipleship is a lifelong process of putting off the old me, and putting on the new me that resembles Christ. Not just some big outstanding sins, but in every area of our lives. Our thought lives, our desires, ambitions, goals and purposes. Our priorities, loves, hopes and longings. Our words, and our unspoken, but thought words. Our non-verbal communications and our habits. Our work ethic, our use of money, and time, and our resources. Our way of working, and our way of relaxing and resting. Our relationships to family, friends, colleagues, neighbours and enemies. Christ does not belong in one compartment of your life. Christ now owns the whole house, and every room is His, to be inspected by Him, to be rearranged by Him, to be cleaned by Him.

This happens by the Spirit as we keep exposing ourselves to truth about Christ in His Word, and purpose to obey it dependently.

Now why will this conformity to Christ bring about more knowledge of God?

John 14:21-23 ¹ *"He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him."* ²² *Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, "Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?"* ²³ *Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him."*

When we are more like Him, it is as if our very lives become more and more hospitable for the presence of God. Yes, the moment we are regenerated, we receive the Spirit who comes in to dwell. But what Jesus is speaking of here is not a positional matter. This is an experiential matter. The believer who obeys, as it were, sweeps out that which grieves God, puts out the welcome mat, and says, "Come and make yourself at home in my life; fellowship with me; commune with me; enjoy me, because I love what you love.

Paul uses exactly the same idea in His prayer of Ephesians 3:16-19. There he says that if we cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification, Christ will dwell in our hearts. And the word there for dwell is the word which means 'house-down', to be at home, to settle in. Yes, if you are Christian you are in Christ and Christ is in you. But that's not the same as Christ being at home in you.

Christ is at home in you when you, as a disciple, seek to conform to His character. Your life becomes as it were, more and more familiar to God, your body and life is a welcome place for Him to commune. Spurgeon said, "Love reveals itself to love: God manifests his heart to the heart of his people."

God is pleased to reveal more of Himself to you, and you are coming to know Him by experience. The more like Him you are, the more you know Him from the inside. Your own loves are being transformed. We do become like the thing we are trying to be. I read something humorous by C.S. Lewis.

He said, "Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed".

That's true, not only of being foolish, but of being noble, or wise, or generous. When we seek to become like Christ, then by His Spirit, we are changed. We know Him from the inside because we begin to think and feel and desire as He does.

III. Knowing Christ Through Conversions

Matthew 28:18 - Mark 1:1 ⁸ And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

Part of what it means to be a disciple is to make disciples. Jesus commanded it here, so if we are truly following Him, then we will obey this command to make disciples. There are three things you have to do to make a disciple:

First, the person must be converted through teaching a clear gospel. That's the going part. You invite people to the Saviour, and if they believe, they are converted.

Second, you bring them to a place of public commitment to a local body of believers. They get established and rooted in a family of believers that they are accountable to. That's the baptising part. Third, you coach them to understand the Christian life and teach them to practice it. That's the teaching part. Conversion, commitment and then coaching. Invitation, immersion, and instruction.

Now you have to ask yourself, why did God choose to do it this way? God is not a God of waste, a God of inefficiency. However, using very imperfect disciples as the means to make other disciples, seems, on the surface, like a flawed method. We get it wrong, we fail to witness, we mix up the message, we contradict it with our lives, we are seemingly quite inefficient. So why did God do it this way? Well, clearly the Lord wants more than just the end-result of more disciples. He wants the existing disciples to experience something when they do that disciple-making. What is that?

First, to make disciples, you have to own Christ, and own Him publicly. Secret disciples don't reproduce themselves. People who practice only friendship evangelism don't make disciples, they only make friends. If you want to make disciples, you have to be willing to own Christ. And what happens to the believer who is willing to own Christ publicly?

Matthew 10:25-33 *"It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household!"²⁶ "Therefore do not fear them. For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known."²⁷ "Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops."²⁸ "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."²⁹ "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will."³⁰ "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered."³¹ "Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."³² "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven."³³ "But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven."*

Christ owns you, and not merely positionally. There is something experiential here. You experience intimacy with God. God is close to you when you are willing to own him at risk to yourself. When Stephen was willing to own Christ at the risk of his own life, he saw Jesus standing by the throne, to welcome him home. Christ's presence was known and felt when he owned Christ publicly.

Paul had the same thing;

2 Timothy 4:16-17 *¹⁶ At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them. ¹⁷ But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me,*

Think of your own experience. When you have chosen to speak out about your faith, witness to someone else, teach another believer, what is the effect on your joy, on your experience of God? It is a strange thing - in that moment you often experience more joy in communing with God, than you do discomfort at another person shunning you or disliking what you're saying. The point is, spreading His name causes you to own him, and nothing draws you to Him like owning Him publicly.

The second reason why seeking to make disciples causes us to know God is that when we do so, we have to know and be like Christ. We need to understand the Word, and then we need to teach it and model it to others. There's the saying that those who can, do, and those who can't teach. But that's not the case in Christianity. We are all charged with teaching one another. So we all have to be learning, and we all have to be seeking to implement what we are learning.

I think God does this on purpose. He knows our deceitful heart all too well. He knows how diligent we would be to learn His Word, and to obey it if we were responsible for only ourselves. But become a spiritual parent, and you quickly want to know in your heart, what you were content to know in your head. Teaching others deepens and reinforces your knowledge of Christ.

Through these three ways then, we can come to know God in discipleship. We know Him through our commitment, where our priorities are tested, and we come to die to self and love Him most. We know Him through conformity to his character, where our lives welcome Him, and we resemble Him. We know Him through being committed to conversion, where we own Him, and make Him known to others.

Apart from being a disciple, and making disciples, there is no growth in the knowledge of God.

Take up your cross, commit, evangelise, and allow God to reveal Himself to you.