

DISCIPLESHIP: A HIGH CALLING

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

In October, 1955 I entered an empty tomb in Jerusalem, the very tomb, according to many, where the body of Christ was placed following his death. I was a spiritually bankrupt man. I had no resources left, having burned them all, and I had finally come to the realization that I needed to change my life radically. There in that tomb I gave my life to the resurrected Christ, and that very day my new life in Christ began. I didn't know that I was embarking on a high calling: becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. In the intervening years I have learned that that high calling is a process. When Jesus said to his first disciples, "Follow me and I will make you to become fishers of men," and they immediately dropped their fishing nets and followed him, that was just the beginning of the process for them. I'm grateful that this is a process, and that God is patient and loving toward his disciples as he leads them into spiritual maturity.

As we have been learning in our studies in the gospel of Luke, the Lord's mission on earth was to "...seek and to save that which was lost" (19:10). Once we place our faith in him as our Lord and Savior, his desire for us is that we join him as disciples in his mission on this earth--the redemption of men, women and children from the kingdom of darkness. We have likened this process to a school curriculum. Thus, in Discipleship #101, we learned that Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:18-27.)

Then in Discipleship #102, Jesus warned that we are not to try to follow him with our own agenda, but rather when he calls us, we are to be willing to leave our security, family and friends immediately for, as he said, "No one after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:57-10:24.) In Discipleship #103, Jesus reminded all who desired to follow him and become his disciples that we must be willing to hate (love less, in other words) our families as well as our own lives and give up all our possessions (Luke 14: 25-35).

To help us see how some of these truths are worked out in flesh and blood, let me read to you an unknown author's impression of the life of the apostle Paul once he came into a vital relationship with Jesus on the Damascus Road: "He is a man without the care of making friends, without the hope or desire of worldly goods, without the apprehension of worldly loss, without the care of life and without the fear of death. ...A man of one thought--the Gospel of Christ. A man of one purpose--the glory of God. A fool, and content to be reckoned a fool for Christ. ...He must speak or he must die, and though he should die, he will speak. He has no rest but hastens over land and sea, over rocks and trackless deserts. He cries aloud and spares not, and will not be hindered. In prisons he lifts up his voice and in the tempests of the ocean he is not silent. Before awful councils and throned kings, he witnesses in behalf of the truth. Nothing can quench his voice but death, and even in the article of death, before the knife has severed his head from his body, he speaks, he prays, he testifies, he confesses, he beseeches, he wars, and at length he blesses the cruel people" (True Discipleship, Wm. MacDonald).

As we continue in our study we will see that as our Lord moves closer to the cross, the high calling of discipleship continues to be his focus. Thus, in Discipleship #104 (Luke 17:1-19), we will find that our Lord will remind his men of this high calling by encouraging them: 1) to not become stumbling blocks to sinners who are seeking him; 2) to be willing to rebuke and to forgive sinners who repent of their sins; 3) to grow in their faith towards him; and 4) to serve him with a thankful heart.

I. Beware of becoming a stumbling block

Luke 17:1-2

And He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks should come, but woe to him through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble.

As we have seen in our earlier studies, Jesus has been teaching the gospel to the tax-gatherers and sinners who had gathered around him (15:1). But the Pharisees were grumbling, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." They were inferring that Jesus could not possibly be the Son of God because to eat with sinners was tantamount to agreeing with their immoral lifestyle. They thought it wrong that these sinners, who had probably broken all Ten Commandments as well as the traditions of Judaism, should be offered forgiveness. The Pharisees regarded this as too simple a solution in light of the fact that most of them had spent their entire lives seeking to live up to the requirements of the law and its traditions. Yet our Lord sought to show them the secrets of the kingdom of God through parables and stories, but, since Luke 15:1, none of them had accepted his gracious invitation of salvation.

As Jesus listened to the grumbling attitude of the Pharisees, in the presence of the sinners who were seeking to understand spiritual truth, he used this as a "teachable moment." He wanted them to love the Pharisees but not to follow in their footsteps when it came to tempting others to sin. "It is inevitable that stumbling-blocks should come...", said Jesus. The original meaning of the word translated "stumbling block" means tempting someone to sin. It is always used metaphorically in the New Testament, and ordinarily of anything that arouses prejudice or becomes a hindrance to others or causes them to fall by the way. In this context, our Lord is warning his disciples that as sinners are drawn to the gospel of the kingdom it was inevitable that some would trip over a stumbling-block placed in their path by someone opposed to the messenger as well as the message of salvation. There is the reality of opposition in a fallen world. Within a few months, Jesus and his cross would become an offense to the Jewish leadership (1 Cor. 23), and it has remained so in every generation up to this very day.

"...but woe to him through whom they come!" said Jesus. It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble. In that culture, everyone knew of the various types of millstones that were used to crush grain. Smaller millstones were for home use, but when it came to harvest time, farmers used much larger millstones, up to four or five feet in diameter. The grain was placed on a base stone, and then the millstone (which had a hole in the middle as big as a man's head) was lifted up to the stationary stone, which had a center peg as an axle, so that once the millstone was in place it could be turned around in a circle by a mule or camel until the grain was crushed into fine flour.

As Jesus was saying this you can be sure he was warning his disciples about their future ministry, but at the same time he was looking at the lifestyle of the Pharisees. They were the very stumbling stones that he had in mind as he observed them trying to confuse and discourage the open-hearted tax-gatherers and sinners. The warning is very serious.

In his book *According to Luke*, David Gooding wrote:

"...no sin against a fellow-man can possibly be more serious than to do something by act or word to stumble him in his faith, or to break that faith, in God, in the deity of Christ, in the authority of His Word, in the value of his redemption or the reality of his salvation."

Therefore, if anyone caused "these little ones" to stumble on their way to Jesus, "...the consequences for the people responsible for that occurrence will be so grave when they come into the presence of God that it would be better ..." for that person to take his own life rather than to go on living and turning others away from Jesus. John encouraged the Ephesian church later that "The one who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause for stumbling in him." They don't stumble and they don't cause others to stumble because they are living in the power of the Holy Spirit and walking in the light of the truth of Jesus Christ.

Several years ago, a team of men from Peninsula Bible Church was invited to go to a Christian college in another state to minister during their "Spiritual Emphasis" week. We were invited to speak in chapel, at

dormitory meetings in the evenings, to teach Bible classes in the homes of the professors, attend classes with the students, etc. It was challenging and enjoyable week. However, in the course of the week it became evident that several professors were forsaking the principle of intellectual honesty in their Bible courses and deliberately seeking to undermine the faith of their young students. On Friday, our team was invited to speak to the whole faculty. I wasn't sure what I was going to say since I did not know the teachers who were placing stumbling blocks in the path of "these little ones." My heart was pounding as I asked the Lord to give me the words to say so that people would not miss the point. Several of our team addressed the President and his staff, and then I was asked to say a few words. I must say that I can't take any credit for what I said because the way I spoke was foreign even to me. Following a few words of thanks for some of the good things that had occurred during the week, I said, "I have become acutely aware from a number of conversations I have had with students on this campus that, with full knowledge, several teachers in this Christian college are placing stumbling blocks in the spiritual paths of these young students. Jesus has warned that if you are doing that, it would be better that someone put a millstone around your neck and throw you into the sea." I then sat down. The President thanked me, and the meeting was over. Several teachers thanked me, but I couldn't help notice the many who left in a hurry. We have never been invited back.

Discipleship is a high calling. Let us beware of becoming a stumbling block. Secondly,

II. Be willing to rebuke and forgive a repentant brother

Luke 17:3-4

"Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him."

Here Jesus goes on to give three commands to carry out within the Christian community to a true disciple who has been forgiven all of his sins.

Command No. #1: Be on your guard! Speaking of tempting others to sin, look to your own life first and make sure that you are not becoming a stumbling block to those seeking to come into the kingdom. This command has the same idea as our Lord's words in Matt: 7:4-5: "...how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye; and then you will see clearly enough to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

Command No #2: Rebuke a sinning brother. "If your brother sins, rebuke him..." If a disciple should see or find out about a brother who has sinned in the sight of God (as in the immediate context of placing a stumbling block in the way of a sinner who is seeking to come into the kingdom of God), he should rebuke him. That is, look for an opportunity so that he will be able to hear you and have an open heart to repent of his sin. The Lord had already spoken on this subject when he said to his disciples, as recorded in Matt.18:15: "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen to even the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" (a non-believer whom we would seek in love to win into the kingdom).

Command #3: Forgive him. "...and if he repents, forgive him." If your brother or sister is willing to listen to your loving rebuke and confesses, turning from the sinful activity and turning toward God again, forgive them. This is not a suggestion; it is a command from Jesus.

The parable of the prodigal son is a wonderful example of a true repentant heart, a heart that is ready to forgive. Speaking of the son, Luke wrote, "But when he came to his senses, he said ...'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son, make me as one of your hired hands'" (Luke 15:17-19.) As his father had already in his heart forgiven his sinful son, even before he confessed his sin, so we must fill our hearts with

the spirit of forgiveness towards those who have wronged us or others. And if he sins against you seven times a day and returns to you seven times, saying "I repent," forgive him. The forgiveness must be immediate, definite, incisive, and made in a spirit of genuine forgiveness (Matt.18:35).

The Lord had taught the disciples to pray: "And forgive us our sins as we also have forgiven our debtors....For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matt. 6:12-15.) Earlier, Peter had asked the Lord: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.'" Paul wrote to the Ephesian church whose members were having difficulties with each other: "...do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:30-32.)

Why all this talk of forgiveness if one truly repents of his sins against you or me? It is because our Lord understands our frailty. We were born in Adam, and sin has taken a fearsome toll in our lives. God knows that we are still in the process of learning about our new nature in the Second Adam, who is Christ himself, so we need to be patient. None of us has even been here before, and we make all kinds of mistakes against each other. Nobody plans on hurting people, being angry at people, being jealous, envious and filled with malice at people. Each morning, I ask God to use me to be a righteous man. When something goes wrong later in the day, when I'm angry at someone and he's angry at me, I ask myself what happened. I didn't plan this. Quite the opposite. Let us remember, first, that God in Christ has forgiven us. Second, we have never before been in this arena where we are known as children of God. And third, God is maturing us so that we will be like Jesus, and the process is not finished yet. We need to remember the wise and godly individual who said, "God is not finished with me yet!"

Speaking of how the "old Adam" expresses itself when Jesus is not allowed to be Lord, I read last week the end of the long and tragic story of Marine Col. William R. Higgins. This man was serving with the U.N. peacekeeping force in Lebanon when he was seized by rebel forces on Feb. 17, 1988. According to a videotape, he was killed on July 31, 1989. His body was recently found and returned to the United States for burial. After the burial services, Higgins' widow, Marine Corps Major Robin Higgins, issued a statement urging Americans not to forgive the hostage takers. She said, "If we forgive, if we forget, if we thank these savages, then we are merely inviting them, at a time and place they will select, to kill again. Shame on us if we do." But this is not how a disciple of Jesus should respond. And I can understand it. It's only the grace of God that can change a hard heart to a forgiving heart. Only God can do this so that a heart is willing to forgive such a wrong. It's interesting that Terry Anderson, another hostage who was released recently, replying to the question, "Can you forgive your captives?" said, "Life is too short. I'm a Christian; we have been called to forgive."

To be a disciple of Christ is a high calling. We must beware of becoming a stumbling block; be willing to forgive a repentant sinner, and

III. Ask the Lord to increase our faith

Luke 17:5-10

And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea'; and it would obey you. But which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me until I have eaten and drunk; and afterward you will eat and drink'? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'"

In light of our Lord's commands, the disciples felt spiritually weak in their faith. But Jesus never asks any of his true followers to do anything apart from him. As they placed their small faith in him for each new situation, he would accomplish his will in and through them. Here Jesus uses the illustration of one of nature's smallest seeds, the mustard seed. As small as this seed is it still has within it the principle of life: it is a living seed and it will grow. At that moment the disciples' faith was small, but Jesus encouraged them to start trusting him where they were and in time, in the midst of the most difficult tasks they were called to, their faith would grow to such a point that if they needed to cast a mulberry tree into the sea, it would be so. Faith they had; what they needed was the reminder to focus on the Lord rather than on the immediate circumstances or demands.

As our Lord was preparing to go to the cross, he was also preparing the disciples to carry on the good news of the kingdom after his death, burial and resurrection. He was preparing them with the knowledge that they would become involved in a spiritual battle as they sought to redeem men and women from the kingdom of darkness and deliver them into the kingdom of light. Thus he wanted them to become faithful disciples, men with the same hearts as those referred to in Luke 12:35-40: "Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps alight and be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns for the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master shall find on the alert when he comes..."

While we are on earth we are called to be faithful disciples in the midst of the spiritual battle for the souls of men and women. Our Lord has already commanded his disciples to (1) not place stumbling blocks in the way of men and women who want to come into the kingdom of God; (2) prepare their hearts to rebuke a brother as well as forgive one who repents; and (3) grow in their faith in him so they could be greatly used in his plan of evangelism in the Age of the Spirit and the building of his church.

Disciples should not come to the house after a long day in the field hoping that the master will ask them to sit and eat with him even before they prepare his meal, or for have him stop in the midst of the battle and thank them for their faithfulness. This is the time for us to take our responsibilities of discipleship very seriously. We are called to be disciples by the grace of God. You and I who were once his enemies are now his disciples. Rejoice, remain faithful, and be thankful. At the end of the battle, our Lord promises, as he said in Luke 12:37, "Blessed are those slaves whom the master shall find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at table, and will come up and wait on them. Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves."

I remember hearing the story of a faithful missionary couple who came back to this country following many difficult years of ministry in Africa. As their ship docked in New York harbor they heard a band on the dock playing welcome music for a returning passenger. Hundreds of this passenger's family and friends were gathered to greet their loved one. The missionary couple hoped to have someone from their mission board greet them, but by the time they came down the gangplank the band and the welcoming crowds had all gone their separate ways. All that was left to greet them were a few seagulls and the trash from the celebration that had been held earlier on the dock. Not knowing what to do next, they walked a few blocks, carrying their suitcases in silence. Finally, they found a rundown hotel and checked in for the evening. As they sat in the dimly lit room, the husband could not contain himself any longer. In anger and frustration he cried out to: "Honey, we worked so hard all these years. We have been faithful to our Lord, to our calling, to our mission board and to our people in Africa. You would have thought that someone from our board would have met us and welcomed us home, wouldn't you?" After a moment of silence, his wife reminded him of their eternal hope: "But honey, we aren't home yet!" she said.

Being a disciple of Christ is a high calling. We must beware of becoming a stumbling block; be willing to rebuke and to forgive a repentant sinner; continue to ask the Lord to increase our small but living faith in him so that we may serve him from a heart of love and faithfulness. And finally, as disciples

IV. We are called to be thankful servants

Luke 17:11-19

And it came about while He was on the way to Jerusalem, that He was passing between Samaria and Galilee. And as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten leprous men, who stood at a distance; and they raised their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" And when He saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And it came about that as they were going, they were cleansed. Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan. And Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine-where are they? Were none found who turned back to give glory to God, except this foreigner?" And he said to Him, "Rise, and go your way; your faith has made you well."

The parable that Jesus told reminded Luke of an incident that occurred a little earlier as Jesus and his disciples were traveling south toward Jerusalem, on the border between Samaria and Galilee, before they crossed over the Jordan River into Perea (modern Jordan). Ten leprous men came out to meet Jesus. It must have been a terrible sight to see so many men banded together, their flesh rotting away from their bodies. The smell would have driven away anyone who came across their path. But not Jesus, who had come to save the lost. These men stood at a distance and, having heard of Jesus from people in Galilee and Samaria, called out, like a choir in unison, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" And he showed them pity. Rather than touching them, as he had done in other instances, providing an instant cure, he asked them to place their faith in him and go to the temple in Jerusalem: "Go and show yourselves to the priests." According to Lev. 13-14, if a leper was cured he was to go to the priest to demonstrate God's grace, then the priest would publicly restore that man or woman back into fellowship with the community. In this case, as all ten placed their faith in Jesus' command and began to walk south towards Jerusalem, they were completely healed.

Luke records that one leper was different from the other nine. Once he realized he was completely healed at the word of Jesus, he did three things: he turned back towards Jesus; he began praising God; and he fell on his face at the feet of Jesus, thanking him. Then Luke drops a bombshell: this man was a hated Samaritan! The Samaritan people had intermarried with Gentiles, set up their own religion in Samaria instead of Jerusalem, studied only the first five books of Moses, and built their own temple and worshipped God in Samaria. Now this healed Samaritan was thanking a Jew and bowing at his feet.

Jesus asked three questions of this man and then blessed him. "Where there not ten cleansed?" "But the nine, where are they?" "Were none found who turned back to give glory to God, except this foreigner?" And he said to the man, "Rise, and go your way; your faith has made you well ("well" is the same word in Greek as the word for salvation). Jesus was grieved over the lack of thankfulness and praise that was due to the God of the universe who expressed through him his love for sinners. The nine Jewish lepers represented the attitude of the spiritual leaders of Israel: they never returned to Jesus to thank God for their physical healing; they did not realize that their physical healing was only a shadow of the spiritual healing they needed; and that they could have been healed spiritually if they had placed their faith in Jesus as their Messiah. From the story it appears that at least one physically healed leper who was thankful to God and his Son Jesus became a true son of Abraham. He had placed his faith in God and acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God, the Master of his body, soul and spirit. And this man was a foreigner!

The Sunday before Christmas, Eff Martin taught from Isaiah 9 on the prophecy of our coming Lord from Isaiah 9, where Jesus is referred to as Wonderful Counselor. Eff gave an invitation to the congregation to seriously consider inviting Jesus into their lives, saying that Jesus would become their Wonderful Counselor. The following week, Eff got a phone call from some friends who had invited a young man to church that morning. As he listened to the sermon of hope, salvation and peace, he invited Jesus into his life and spent Sunday afternoon with his friends, rejoicing over the love of God and his gift of salvation. I am reminded of Paul's words to the church of Thessalonica: "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:16-18.)

To be called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, our wonderful Lord and Savior, is a high calling. When we confess him as our Lord, he begins to bring us into spiritual maturity so that we can join him in his wonderful plan of evangelism "seeking to save those who are lost." That ministry of redemption occurs in the midst of a

spiritual battlefield. Our Lord encourages and commands his disciples to love our lives, our families and our possessions less and love him more. Further, he commands that we do not become stumbling blocks to those who are on their way to the Lord; to prepare our hearts to be ready to rebuke and forgive our repentant brothers and sisters; to continue to grow in our faith towards Christ so that his will in heaven may be accomplished on earth through us; and finally, to minister as his disciples with hearts of thankfulness because of the grace and spiritual healing he demonstrated towards us when we placed our faith in him as Lord and Savior.

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