

**TUTORIAL**  
**7.20**

# Disciples of the Master

This tutorial introduces the first question in the area of *Discipleship*: 'Are they seeing all other ties, loyalties and commitments being increasingly defined by their primary relationship: disciples of their Master, Jesus Christ?'

## Last time

We briefly traced the theme of *discipleship* through God's Narrative. We noted the kind of equipping and guidance He intended to give in light of the real responsibilities He entrusted to the human beings He'd created. Then we looked at how, after the Fall, this commitment played out in the relationships He pursued with individuals and the nation of Israel.

We also touched on the Greek and Jewish cultural dynamics that would have played into the New Testament term *mathētēs*, the equivalent of our English term, *disciple*. Then we thought about Jesus and His general call to the masses to follow Him as well as His specific call to the twelve men who, with one exception, would become His apostles. Also we saw the way He prepared them for the task He would entrust to them.

Finally, we considered the role of discipleship in the early Church, in particular the focus that the apostle Paul put on working with others and developing younger men in the faith like Timothy.

## A framework of objectives

Once again, let's remind ourselves that in these Tutorials we are introducing a framework that's intended to help us picture something we would want to be part of; the kind of impact that, by faith, we can imagine God's Word having in the next area of ministry He leads us to. Hopefully it can help with motivation as we equip ourselves, or perhaps face leaving family and friends and moving to a new context, even to another country. Maybe it gives us ways of describing to our friends and leaders at church just what it is that we are committing to. Perhaps we will be, or already are, in a situation where we can regularly share God's Word with an individual or take a leading role in a Bible study. Having a framework and objectives in mind should help us evaluate the

impact of Truth on the individual or group so far, and then decide how to move ahead with them.

Also, as we read articles, browse ministry related websites, or have conversations about different approaches to God's work, hopefully these areas we've discussed will provide something of a filter; so we can say, "Yes, I believe this fits with what God is all about and I can incorporate it into my approach." Or, "No. If I did that, I really don't believe it would help to communicate God's Word clearly, or encourage the right sense of Identity. I can't see how that would result in vibrant, fruitful spiritual life, or really help people to follow Jesus as His disciples so they can, in turn, help others."

Obviously we don't want to take a position of 'having it all together' - we always need to keep a learner's attitude - even when we have experience to go from. But holding to convictions that are built on God's Word and the lessons His servants have learned is not wrong, and with these areas in mind it may be possible to contribute positively to conversations, even to humbly and graciously challenge assertions others are making that we might have concerns about.

## **The first question under "D" for *Discipleship***

- Are they seeing all other ties, loyalties and commitments being increasingly defined by their primary relationship: disciples of their Master, Jesus Christ?
- Are they being helped to apply the general truth from God's Word to their own specific real-life situations?
- Are they able to access regular, godly input and genuine friendships that intentionally help them along as they follow Jesus in the walk of faith?
- Are they being encouraged to function in the areas in which God has gifted and given them abilities so they can develop in their service to Him and His Body?
- Do they have access to defined pathways that offer Bible-based resources, practical instruction and relational discipleship to adequately equip them to serve the church locally and globally?

## **A picture of discipleship**

When we talk about discipleship and particularly this first question, we're brushing up against the "Lordship salvation" controversy because its contentions are all about loyalties and commitments. The question is asked - and often answered in diametrically opposing ways, "How much commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord is required for salvation?" Our intention here is not to

get embroiled in the whole debate, but we should probably identify some understandings of God's Word that frame the picture of discipleship presented here:

- God's Word clearly teaches repentance as an essential part of the new birth.
- We must take great care to guard against teaching a false gospel by mixing elements of human effort with God's grace in our description of faith's role in salvation.
- Personal acknowledgement of Jesus Christ alone, not only as Saviour but also *rightful* Lord, is a prerequisite to salvation.
- As fallen people we never completely make Jesus "Lord of all" at any point, least of all before salvation; this is legitimately part of the ongoing process of discipleship into which He calls us.
- All believers are disciples of Jesus; i.e. it is not just the realm of those who are specially committed or tagged for certain roles in the church.

## Our need to relate

Human beings are relational. That's a rather obvious statement isn't it? Being poorly adjusted as a person, by definition involves some kind of difficulty in relating to others. The more extreme forms of relational problems with identifiable symptoms are given ominous sounding labels by clinical psychology: Antisocial Personality Disorder, Relationship Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder, Avoidant Personality Disorder. They all describe conditions in which people find it difficult or even impossible to relate in a "normal" way to other people. Part of being made in the image of God is the ability and urge - stronger in some than others - to *relate*. Not only to be acquainted with lots of people, to have hundreds of social media friends and followers, but to have some bonds that go deep, to share real understanding and empathy, to "know and be known".

We start out life completely reliant on others for survival. Our associations begin with simple one-way dependencies, usually in the immediate family, but as time goes by they shift and multiply...and become increasingly complex, with different levels of interdependence. Most of us only have to cast our minds back to our school years to be reminded of just how dramatic and fraught relationships can be, or at least seem, at that stage of life. This is magnified exponentially when the opposite sex shifts in our eyes from being a despised sub-race to something worth pursuing and wooing. And it never really seems to stop, this process of adding to and managing an intricate web of different types of relationships. We're always relating in some way: to the guy at the service station where we regularly fill up, our accountant, the other parents at our kids' school, old friends we keep in contact with through social media, work colleagues, the leaders at church, grown up siblings, aging parents, spouses.

Taken from one viewpoint, that's exactly what human life is - a personal network of dependencies, commitments, obligations, unresolved conflicts, loyalties, affections etc. And societies are an extension or amalgamation of all these relationships into some kind of definable unit. Societies and communities represent the idea of the individual in a relationship with an entire group; of people connected by a shared identity, ideals (e.g. equality, freedom, opportunity), religious beliefs, or even racial superiority (usually with disastrous results). In some situations this relationship to a society plays out as patriotism that, conditioned by training and loyalty to a smaller unit of comrades-in-arms, is strong enough to motivate individuals to give up their lives for the sake of their country. A particularly destructive form of extreme loyalty to a sub-group within society has become known as *tribalism* (e.g. Political corruption that ensures the dominance of a particular ethnic group), or *neo-tribalism*, (e.g. Hooligan supporters of certain European football teams.) Religious cults prey on the human inclination towards dependent relationships and loyalties, binding adherents together under authoritarian rule, esoteric understanding and a fabricated sense of being under siege from the rest of the world.

But even at a less extreme level, there's a nearly infinite variety of voices constantly clamouring for our loyalties: "Invest exclusively with our bank." "Give to our worthy cause." "Sign up to our rewards program." "Eat our hamburgers." "Use our website." More traditional societies with less exposure to corporate advertising are, if anything, even more reliant on a network of dependencies and loyalties. Fishermen need the goodwill of market stallholders to sell their catch while it's fresh. The rural family that keeps three cows depends on the rickshaw driver who comes around to collect the morning's milk. Farmers rely on the local store owner to give rice and kerosene on credit in lean times, to be paid back after the harvest. Today's successful hunter, knowing that next time his family will benefit from someone else's good fortune, distributes wild pig meat in the village. When a child is sick you might need the help of the workers at the clinic and then, just to be sure, take a chicken over to the old lady who knows the chants for this kind of fever.

## A discipleship relationship with Jesus

We're reminding ourselves just how important and all-pervasive relationships are at every level of human life, because this is obviously very relevant when we consider what a growing discipleship relationship with Jesus looks like. People's initial encounter with His call to discipleship never occurs in a relational vacuum. Whether they finally hear Him after a gradual increase in volume over a period of time or as a loud, dramatic summons, the call always emerges above a chorus of other voices demanding their attention and devotion. This has always been the case. Abraham was a son, a brother, a husband, the head of a household, and a member of a community, when God began to draw him into His purposes. David's immensely rewarding, if occasionally painful, walk with God began in the context of his family, and continued through his relationship with Saul, Jonathan, his band of fighters, the

prophet Samuel, the nation of Israel, and his wives and children. We're not told what Zebedee thought when his sons James and John left him alone to mend nets in response to Jesus' invitation to follow Him, but family obligations must have featured strongly for these fishermen as they followed the Master and became His apostles.

In the weeks and months that followed that first call, the disciples would hear Jesus directly address the issue of relationships that compete with being His disciple. Probably the most dramatic instance is in Luke 14:26 when He said "If you want to be my disciple, you must hate everyone else by comparison - your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters." Of course we need to read this in its context and remember that He was addressing a large group, many of whom were following Him for the wrong reasons. And we know from the rest of God's Word that He wasn't talking about how people can be made right with God. We also know from the Narrative and Jesus' own teaching that He wasn't denigrating the family; He wasn't saying that people shouldn't honour their parents or love their spouses and children. But He *was* making the point that being His disciple involves a willingness to place all other connections, allegiances and duties in a lower priority to a relationship with Him.

But this is not a simple matter of mathematics; of calculating that Jesus is getting a bit more of our time, money or energy than anyone else. We've already noted just how much "normal" human life is defined by an incredibly complex, multi-layered tangle of connections, affiliations, friendships and bonds. Human hearts and minds are not equipped to evaluate all of that objectively; they're unable to wash away the subtle motivations, the insecurities, the pride, the lusts, the unhealthy dependencies, jealousies, and miscommunication that have been the grit in the cogs of all human relationships since the Fall. As zealous as a new disciple might be about making Jesus "Lord of all their lives", they don't yet know Him or themselves well enough to do that. But their zeal isn't misplaced, because He honours this and through His Spirit, His Word, and other disciples He gladly takes on the task of realigning all other relationships according to this one they've now entered into with Him. His desire is not to add to the weight of futile obligations and guilt that many people come to Him with, but rather to lighten it by taking it from them. Discipleship costs, but the relationship with Him itself is not a heavy burden. Instead it's like a yoke or harness that allows His disciples to walk alongside Him, learning from Him, and experiencing peace and rest as they get to know a Master who is truly "humble and gentle at heart" (Matt. 11:28-30).

## **The challenges of discipleship**

Salvation often brings with it added relational pressures as a new believer faces changes in how family members, friends and acquaintances view them. We'll talk more in subsequent tutorials about the role of other believers in *discipleship*, but we should note here just how invaluable it is for someone in

that situation to get help from another disciple who's a little further down the road. We know that once God has brought someone into His family on the basis of their faith in Jesus' sacrifice, He will never give them up; but tragically there are numerous examples of His children who never move far at all along the road of discipleship. There's a very real chance of them giving up right at the beginning when they take their first faltering steps and immediately face the challenge of dealing with a whole network of existing relationships and competing loyalties. Without anyone to help them see how their new relationship with Jesus can provide all the comfort and insights they so desperately need right now, they can wrongly see it as another whole set of obligations and commitments they feel inadequate for. Facing this on their own, there's every chance they'll simply give up, with the very real possibility of never really knowing the exciting privilege and responsibilities of being Jesus' disciples.

At the same time, a danger for new believers is that, instead of coming to see their connection with Jesus as the relationship that defines all others, they give that role to an individual, group or church that has been instrumental in them coming to faith. No doubt we've all seen amusing pictures of a hen, for example, being followed around by young that are clearly from a bigger species of bird, like geese or ducks. When they hatched from the egg, an instinctive bond was immediately created with the first living thing they saw. Similarly, a new believer, feeling emotionally vulnerable and also, understandably, grateful to those who've nurtured their faith, can mistakenly give their primary allegiance to others who in reality are also needy disciples of Jesus just like themselves.

Those who take on the role of teaching Truth and bringing others to Christ, must be very conscious of this danger and proactively work against it. We've all seen the dangers of the cult of personality and celebrity within evangelical circles and the pitfalls of believers putting their faith in individuals. The same is true of denominations, churches, para-church organisations, mission agencies, Christian educational facilities and programs when, often unintentionally, they attract loyalty and dependency that should rightfully be given only to the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we perhaps envisage our own involvement in a situation where we have opportunity to share God's Word with individuals or a group of people and see them come to faith, the picture we should have in mind is of us introducing them to Jesus and then, once they've become His disciples, cheering them on as they walk alongside and grow in Him. In our own relationship as disciples of the Master, we need to keep asking for His help to avoid the subtle temptation of wanting people to follow *us*, of making a personal commitments to *us*, of finding their needs met in *us*. Likewise, those involved in leading churches and ministry teams, must avoid the trap of conflating or confusing true discipleship with people becoming *their* members, *their* converts. For those who take on

roles of guiding others, the real measure of their success is how much they are able to help others follow Jesus. The way they do this is through their words, but far more influentially, as they show their own loyalty to Him and His Cause by what they prioritise and value in their lives.

## Some extra questions

To go along with the first question in the area of *Discipleship*, 'Are they seeing all other ties, loyalties and commitments being increasingly defined by their primary relationship: disciples of their Master, Jesus Christ?', we can also ask:

- *Are they realising that the relationship with Jesus is unique from all others in terms of its scope and rightful claims, and because it gives them access to His guidance in handling all other relationships correctly?*
- *Are new believers being given help by other disciples as they face the challenges of reconfiguring their existing personal commitments and obligations in light of the relationship they've entered into with Jesus?*
- *Are the individuals or teams in discipleship roles truly encouraging other believers in their commitments to Jesus as Master, or are they - perhaps unknowingly - fostering unhealthy individual and corporate allegiances?*



## DISCUSSION POINTS

### *Disciples of the Master*

1. What are some of the things you'd say to a new believer who asked for your advice about how they should relate to an unbelieving partner, now that they are following Jesus? Would you have any helpful examples to share from your own experience of relating to others as a disciple?
2. Describe some of the concrete things that you feel a church should (a) *avoid* (b) *do*, to encourage members to give their primary allegiance as disciples to Jesus, rather than to individuals or to the church.
3. Do you feel there is an appropriate, healthy level of loyalty that someone can give to a group, Christian organisation, church etc.? Also comment on any factors, circumstances

or cultural trends that play into this for many today, especially the younger generation.



## ACTIVITIES

### *Disciples of the Master*

1. After doing some research and reading on the “Lordship salvation” debate, in less than a page:
  - (a) summarise the salient points of contention,
  - (b) briefly explain your own perspective/standpoint,
  - (c) share any comments or questions you might have about any of the five bulleted points made early in this tutorial that undergird the picture of discipleship presented in these resources.