

CHARACTER OF A DISCIPLE

By Rev. Will Nelken

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What is a Christian? Is it a person who is non-X (insert the name of any other religion)? Is it a cultural identity? Is it a religious affiliation?

Water baptism is the universally recognized ceremony of becoming a Christian. But does the ceremony make one a Christian? Or simply demonstrate one's faith? (We call it "believer's baptism" because of the prerequisite personal decision.)

What exactly is the choice one must make? Is belief enough? If it also requires actions, what actions? How many of such actions?

What is the "matter of the heart" which identifies one as a Christian? I think it is a "bent," a "leaning," a persistent aim or intention.

God spoke through the psalmist, Asaph, to express *His* desire (Psalm 81:13): *Oh, that my people would listen to me! Oh, that Israel would follow me, walking in my paths!*

Follow Me

It was this same desire that motivated Jesus Christ. As He tapped people on the shoulder, He said, "Follow me."

Matthew 4

¹⁸ *One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers—Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew—throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living.*

¹⁹ *Jesus called out to them, "Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!"* ²⁰ *And they left their nets at once and followed him.*

²¹ *A little farther up the shore he saw two other brothers, James and John, sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, repairing their nets. And he called them to come, too.* ²² *They immediately followed him, leaving the boat and their father behind.*

But it wasn't long before He encountered other responses.

Luke 9

⁵⁷ *As they were walking along, someone said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go."*

⁵⁸ *But Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head."*

[This indicates that it's not an easy pursuit.]

⁵⁹ *He said to another person, "Come, follow me."*

The man agreed, but he said, "Lord, first let me return home and bury my father."

⁶⁰ *But Jesus told him, "Let the spiritually dead bury their own dead! Your duty is to go and preach about the Kingdom of God."*

[Some have competing priorities.]

⁶¹ *Another said, "Yes, Lord, I will follow you, but first let me say good-bye to my family."*

⁶² *But Jesus told him, "Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God."*

[Some have second thoughts.]

Becoming a Christian does begin with faith, for *"without faith it is impossible to please God"* (Hebrews 11:6). As Jesus put it, *"You believe in God; believe also in Me"* (John 14:1). But it does not end there.

That is why the Scriptures plainly say that *"faith without works is dead"* (James 2:20).

Becoming a Christian means a change—really a series of changes—a change of lifestyle. While it unquestionably involves one's activities, it is dependent on an underlying attitude.

One's faith cannot be judged—good or bad, right or wrong—in a single action, or at a single moment (like a snapshot). It requires a look at the fruit (or fruitfulness) over time.

That's why it is described in the Bible as *"following."* Following God, following Jesus, is what it means to become a Christian.

But what kind of following? Not as day follows night, nor as a falling stone follows the law of gravity. These are merely the natural order of things.

Not as a dog follows a scent. That is merely a momentary attraction.

To follow Jesus as a Christian is to become His disciple.

Disciple's Job Description

To learn how to follow Jesus, then, we must know the job description of a disciple. One version of the job description reads like this:

Matthew 10

²⁴ *"A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ 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.*

[Discipleship involves likeness to the Teacher; going where He goes, eating what He eats, saying what He says, doing what He does.]

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.*

[Discipleship involves fearlessly trusting the Teacher.]

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.*

[Discipleship involves confessing your allegiance to the Teacher.]

³⁴ *“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; ³⁶ and ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.’ ³⁷ He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.*

[Discipleship involves a shift of priorities.]

³⁸ *And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.*

[Discipleship involves dying to self-promotion and self-protection.]

³⁹ *He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.*

[Discipleship involves yielding all to find a new way of living.]

To follow Jesus as a Christian is to become His disciple.

A disciple is a devotee—one who follows, imitates, and emulates the Teacher.

A disciple is a student, a learner—one who observes, listens, asks questions, and seeks to understand not only the teaching, but also the Teacher.

To follow Jesus as a Christian is to become His disciple.

Bondservant

In their letter to the church in Philippi, Paul and Timothy introduce themselves as *“bondservants”* or *“slaves of Jesus Christ”* (Philippians 1:1).

A bondservant is a unique kind of servant. It is a slave who has graduated from forced servitude to willing service as a freed slave.

It is the translation of the Greek word, *doulos*. Those of you familiar with midwifery will recognize the title of doula (the feminine form of *doulos*)—a birthing assistant. So, *doulos*, at its simplest, is an attendant, a helper.

But we can only really begin to grasp its meaning when we consider its counterpart—the one being served—the master, the lord.

This is from the Greek word, *kurios*. Paul and Timothy were *douloi* (plural); Jesus is *Kurios*.

Kurios indicates not only leadership, but ownership—beyond ownership; mastery with the power to dictate or dispose.

Classic Greek literature presents numerous graphic examples of this power. Here are two:

- 1) A *kuria* (a wealthy female slave owner) had an attendant working on a particularly unruly curl in her hair. When the strand refused to be tamed, the *kuria* took a bullwhip from the wall and beat her servant nearly to death. This was shocking, but not regarded as unusual or inappropriate, because she was the *kuria*.
- 2) A young boy was carrying a fresh glass of wine to his *kurios*, who was seated beside a pool, stocked with piranhas. When the boy stumbled, he dropped the glass, breaking it and spilling the wine. In a fury, the *kurios* picked up the boy and heaved him into the pool. After a momentary shock, the party resumed, for he was the *kurios* and the boy was his *doulos*.

This is the context from which Paul chose the word *doulos* to describe his discipleship to Jesus Christ.

The Septuagint is a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek language of the 2nd century BC. In this version of the Old Testament Moses, Joshua, and every great prophet through Malachi has somewhere attached to his name these words: *doulos to theo*—bondservant of God.

This is the nature of the relationship with God of every spiritual leader in the Old Testament and the New, including Jesus, right down to Paul.

What is the key to greatness? Is it ability? Wealth? Talent? Charisma? No. It is service.

It is submissiveness, really—not in the sense of passive willingness, but intentional involvement. It is self-subjection, surrender. It is yielded (not begrudging) service.

Robert Louis Stevenson, the Scottish novelist and poet, had a servant boy who attended his needs. On a particularly hot day, he had dismissed the boy to find rest in a cooler place, but

soon became so heated that he longed for a drink. He thought to himself, “Why did I let the boy go? I would love a pitcher of cold lemonade with ice in it just now.” Just then, the boy appeared with a pitcher of iced lemonade. “Great is your thoughtfulness, my boy!” His servant responded, “No, sir, great is my love.”

One translation of *doulos* is “one who runs ahead to please.” The learned ability to anticipate the master’s desire and fulfill it is characteristic of a *doulos*—and of a disciple.

Jesus is Lord

To follow Jesus as a Christian is to become His disciple, for Jesus is Lord. He is *Kurios*.

Why is Jesus Lord? In a general sense, He is Lord of all, because He is God, who created all things. *Kurios* is the exact equivalent of the Hebrew *Yahweh* or Jehovah.

But in the particular sense of Lord of God’s people, Lord of the Church, there is more to it.

Jesus was not born Lord. The angel who announced His birth said, “*He will be great*” (Luke 1:32). He was born as a man-child—still God, but thoroughly human (except for sin). Lord is a title He earned by His death and resurrection—His yielded, obedient service and the Father’s omnipotent reward.

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter declared, “*Let everyone in Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!*” (Acts 2:36).

How did Jesus become our *Kurios*? By first becoming *doulos to theo*—a servant of God.

In referring to the life and ministry of Christ, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews (10:5) quoted from a much-loved psalm (40:6-8), in which the inspired singer had written: “*I delight to do Your will, O my God!*”

Through the Spirit of prophecy, David expressed the same burden of love and consecration as our Lord Jesus. He was a servant of God. A bondservant. The clue is in verse 6: “*My ear you have pierced.*”

It’s a reference to one of Moses’ rules of slavery (Deuteronomy 15:16-17). When a Hebrew slave was freed after seven years, he might say, “I love my master. I don’t want to go free.” If he did, his master was to present him before God and the priest and publicly pierce his ear. After that, the servant would serve his master for life.

Now, we can understand why Paul described his team as “servants of Jesus Christ.” And, why he also wrote, in the next chapter (Philippians 2:5-8): “*You must have the same attitude that Christ*

Jesus had. ⁶ Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. ⁷ Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross."

"Have the same attitude"—the same mindset, the loving consecration of a servant of God (doulos to theo).

Delighting to do God's will doesn't mean the will of God is always delightful—He sometimes leads through hard places and requires hard choices. But a servant of God—a disciple—has counted the cost and made his consecration; he has committed himself in love to Christ.

Hard Joy

Paul experienced his share of hardships for the Gospel's sake. More than once he was without family, friends, food, clothes, and money. He was beaten with rods, beaten with stones, endangered, shipwrecked, and imprisoned for his faith. Yet his testimony remained radiant:

2 Corinthians 4

⁸ We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. ⁹ We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.

¹⁶ That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. ¹⁷ For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! ¹⁸ So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.

Now, near the end of his life, when he ought to be able to retire from the ministry, to rest from his labors and let a younger man take his place—instead, he found himself in Nero's prison.

For all he had done... For all he had given... For all he had helped others to become... He spent his final years as a prisoner!

Was it worth it, Paul? The burden, the opposition, the hardships, the costly stand for your convictions? Was it worth it? Would you like to know his response? Here it is...

Philippians 1

²⁰ For I fully expect and hope that I will never be ashamed, but that I will continue to be bold for Christ, as I have been in the past. And I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die. ²¹ For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better.

He was hardly concerned over his chains, having learned to find contentment in Christ, no matter what his conditions. He was rejoicing! He was thanking God! He was encouraging others! The servant of God!

Paul was a servant of God. Not a hired servant, not a forced servant, not a grudging servant. He was a loving servant, a joyful servant, a contented servant, a confident servant, a faithful servant.

And because he was faithful as a servant of God—a disciple of Jesus—others were finding Christ and serving Him, too.

If you want to know the character of a disciple, read the words of Jesus: *“Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave (doulos) of everyone else. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:43-45).

To follow Jesus as a Christian is to become His disciple. To become His disciple is to serve Him with your whole heart for your whole life.

What will you choose?