

CHRIST'S
CALL
TO
DISCIPLESHIP

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JAMES
MONTGOMERY
BOICE

Christ's Call to Discipleship

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*To Him
who denied Himself
and took up
His cross for us*

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Preface

Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). So spoke the One Christians call Master.

In the last eighteen years, as pastor of Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church, I have written thirty books. But I have not had apprehensions about how a book would be received until this one. I know that many will misunderstand it. They will suppose I am teaching that good works enter into a believer's justification—a false gospel. I am insisting on the full scope of Jesus' teachings about what being His disciple means. I stress obedience, service, humility, taking up the cross—all major themes in Christ's teaching. But I know because of the weaknesses and distortions of much of today's evangelical teaching that many will see this as somehow being something new and dangerous, and they will reject it as an alien gospel.

Only a few (but I am concerned for those few) will take Christ's call to discipleship seriously and profit by this study.

It is not unusual to hear about Christ's being Lord of all life and that we must acknowledge this if we are Christians. But those who understand what Christ's lordship actually means face a battle on two fronts. One front is manned by the world, which seeks to push Christians back onto the reservation. It says that believers can practice their religion there, where it will do no harm, but that they are not to think of bringing Christianity into the real world of politics, economics, law, and individual "rights." We must oppose this. We must declare that "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). We must show that "all authority in heaven and on earth" has been given to Jesus and indicate what this means (Matthew 28:18).

PREFACE

But the other front is equally challenging. It is held by well-intentioned but erring Christians who believe that it is possible to have Jesus as Savior without having Him as Lord and even go so far as to say that “lordship salvation,” as they call it, is a false gospel. We who oppose this say that there is only one Savior, the *Lord* Jesus Christ, and that anyone who believes in a Savior who is not the Lord is not believing in the true Christ and is not regenerate. We call for commitment to Christ, the true Christ, and challenge the presumption that claims to be Christian while at the same time disregarding or disobeying Christ’s commands.

It is Jesus who said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

It is Jesus who told the Jews of His day, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).

I believe that if America could produce a generation of Christians who genuinely affirm and live by these teachings, that generation by the power of God could transform the world.

In each of my books I thank those who have been particularly helpful to me in seeing the work through its early preaching stages and then into print. The first order of thanks goes to the congregation of Tenth Presbyterian Church, who support me in the use of my time for study, preaching, and writing. Second, I thank the many excellent people on the church staff who ably cover bases that I cannot cover, especially at this present period of significant growth for our center-city congregation. Finally, I thank my exceedingly able secretary, Caecilie M. Foelster, who carefully types and retypes my manuscripts and faithfully sees them through the various stages of proofreading and production. Since we are partners in this work, I know that she and the entire congregation join me in praying that these studies may be used of God as one of the many means needed to revive God’s people and bring reformation to our land.

THE
MEANING
OF
DISCIPLESHIP

— 1 —

The Call to Discipleship

Follow me.

—MATTHEW 9:9

Come, follow me . . . and I will make you fishers of men.

—MARK 1:17

If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.

—JOHN 21:22

There is a fatal defect in the life of Christ's church in the twentieth century: a lack of true discipleship. Discipleship means forsaking everything to follow Christ. But for many of today's supposed Christians—perhaps the majority—it is the case that while there is much talk about Christ and even much furious activity, there is actually very little following of Christ Himself. And that means in some circles there is very little genuine Christianity. Many who fervently call Him “Lord, Lord” are not Christians (Matthew 7:21).

We should not be surprised by this, because Jesus Himself said that this would be the case. But we should be distressed by it.

In Jesus' great sermon on the Mount of Olives, uttered shortly before His crucifixion, Jesus compared professing (but unconverted) Christians

to women waiting for a bridegroom to appear for a wedding banquet. They were unprepared for his coming and were therefore shut out of the wedding. They were not saved. Again, Jesus compared professing Christians to a man who was given a talent to invest but who failed to use it and was condemned by his master on the day of reckoning. Jesus said that he was thrown “into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 25:30). In a third comparison He described these people as failing to feed the hungry, give drinks to those thirsting, receive strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those who were imprisoned. These people called Jesus “Lord.” They considered themselves to be genuinely converted persons. But they were not Christians and so perished.

We need to see where this is true in our churches. We need to ask what it means to be a Christian and whether those shortcomings are descriptions of ourselves.

Costly Grace

There are several reasons that the situation I have described is common in today's church. The first is a *defective theology* that has crept over us like a deadening fog. This theology separates faith from discipleship and grace from obedience. It teaches that Jesus can be received as one's Savior without being received as one's Lord.

This is a common defect in times of prosperity. In days of hardship, particularly persecution, those who are in the process of becoming Christians count the cost of discipleship carefully before taking up the cross of the Nazarene. Preachers do not beguile them with false promises of an easy life or indulgence of sins. But in good times, prosperous times, the cost does not seem so high, and people take the name of Christ without undergoing the radical transformation of life that true conversion implies. In these times, preachers often delude them with an “easy” faith—Christianity without the cross—in order to increase the numbers on their church rolls, whether or not the added people are regenerate.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German churchman of the Nazi era who eventually suffered martyrdom for his opposition to Hitler's policies,

called this erroneous theology “cheap grace.” He said, “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate.”

The contrast is “costly grace.”

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price, to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him. Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*. Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*.¹

Another writer, an American, bemoaned the same situation. Chicago pastor and devotional author A. W. Tozer declared,

The doctrine of justification by faith—a Biblical truth and a blessed relief from sterile legalism and unavailing self-effort—has in our time fallen into evil company and been interpreted by many in such manner as actually to bar men from the knowledge of God. The whole transaction of religious conversion has been made mechanical and spiritless. Faith may now be exercised without a jar to the moral life and without embarrassment to the Adamic ego. Christ may be “received” without creating any special love for him in the soul of the receiver. The man is “saved,”

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 47. Original German edition 1937.

but he is not hungry or thirsty after God. In fact he is specifically taught to be satisfied and encouraged to be content with little.²

It is not only a false theology that has encouraged this fatal lack of discipleship. The error is also due to the absence of what the older devotional writers called a “self-examined life.”

Most Westerners live in a tragically mindless environment. Life is too fast, and our contact with other persons too impersonal for any real thought or reflection. Even in the church we are far more often encouraged to join this committee, back this project, or serve on this board than we are counseled to examine our relationship to God and His Son Jesus Christ. So long as we are performing for the church, few question whether our profession is genuine or spurious. But sermons should suggest that members of a church may not actually be saved, although they are members. Teachers should stress that a personal, self-denying, costly, and persistent following of Christ is necessary if a person is to be acknowledged by Jesus at the final day.

In the absence of this teaching millions drift on, assuming that because they have made verbal acknowledgment of Christ ten, twenty, or even thirty years ago and have done nothing terribly bad since, they are Christians, when actually they may be far from Christ, devoid of grace, and in danger of perishing forever.

“Follow Me”

In this book I want to examine what the Lord Jesus Himself said about discipleship. Study will range over a number of sayings that, taken together, show the meaning, path, cost, and rewards of this essential pursuit. But I say at the outset that the arguments of each of the following chapters are essentially one thesis, namely, that discipleship is not a supposed second step in Christianity, as if one first becomes a believer in Jesus and then, if he chooses, a disciple. From the beginning, discipleship is involved in what it means to be a Christian.

2. A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1948), 12–13.

So I begin at square one, and the start of this area of Christian doctrine is Christ's command "Follow me." There are many texts in which Jesus explains in greater detail and with other images what it means to be His disciple, but the command to follow Him is the first and most basic explanation.

We find it in a number of stories, chiefly in the callings of the first disciples. In Matthew 4:18–22 (parallels in Mark 1:14–20 and Luke 5:1–11), we are told that Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee when He saw two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew. Jesus said, "Come, follow me . . . and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed Him. He went a bit farther and saw two more brothers, James and John, sons of Zebedee. He called them in a similar manner, and they too left their boat and followed Him. Several chapters later in Matthew 9:9–13 (parallels in Mark 2:13–17 and Luke 5:27–32), there is an account of the call of Matthew, also named Levi. Matthew was a tax-collector. He was despised by the people for his collaboration with the Roman authorities. But he obeyed Christ and followed Him. When the people protested Jesus' association with this "sinner," Jesus replied, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." This explanation shows that the command to follow Jesus was not understood by Him to be only a mere physical following or even an invitation to learn more about Him and then see if one wanted to be a permanent disciple or not. Jesus understood it as turning from sin to salvation. It was a call to healing by God.

The gospel of John does things differently from the Synoptics, but the call to follow Christ is no less prominent there. Indeed, there is a sense in which it provides a framework for the gospel. In chapter 1 there is a long narrative in which John the Baptist bears witness of Jesus as the Son of God and the Lamb of God. As a result, two of his disciples begin to follow Jesus physically. When Jesus sees them He issues the invitation, "Come" (v. 39), a synonym for "follow." Following Jesus is the theme of this chapter. Then, at the end of the gospel Jesus tells Peter, whom He has just recommissioned to service, "Follow me!" (John 21:19). When Peter

shifts attention away from his own calling to ask about that of the beloved disciple, Jesus replies, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me" (v. 22). Coming at the end of the gospel, these words are a statement to all would-be Christians that discipleship means following Jesus in a personal and generally costly way.

In all, the words "follow me" occur thirteen times in the gospels. But in addition there are scores of references in which one person or another is said to have followed Christ. Clearly it is a very basic concept.

Elements of Discipleship

In the course of this book each of the following elements will be considered in greater detail. But it is worth stressing here just how much is involved in the words "follow me."

1. *Obedience.* Obedience is an unpopular concept today that we betray by our frequent use of the phrase "blind obedience," meaning mindless adherence to authority. We think of it as enemy soldiers blindly carrying out the inhumane orders of an evil commander. So when we come to a phrase like "follow me" we naturally think of it as an invitation and conform our evangelism to that pattern. We "invite" people to follow Jesus, promising that He will receive them and make them happy. Well, there may be an element of invitation in Christ's call to sinners, but the words "follow me" are in the imperative mood and are therefore a command—which is why those commanded to follow Jesus did in fact immediately leave their nets, boats, counting tables, or whatever else was occupying them and followed Jesus. On His lips the command "Follow me" was no more resistible than the command to Lazarus to "come out" (John 11:43). It was the equivalent of what theologians term God's "effective call."

That is another way of saying that without obedience there is no real Christianity. It is not that people cannot "follow" Jesus in a lesser sense and then fall away when the demands of genuine discipleship become clear to them. Many persons in the gospels seem to have done this. The rich young ruler is an example. But that is not the same as a sheep

of Christ's flock hearing His call and responding to His voice as he recognizes Jesus as his Lord and Master. Those who are genuinely Christ's sheep obey His call from the beginning and enter into a life characterized by obedience.

2. *Repentance.* When Jesus called Matthew, He called one who was a recognized sinner. So He emphasized repentance: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). But the need for repentance is no less evident in the calls of the other disciples. For example, in both Matthew and Mark the account of the calling of the first disciples is immediately preceded by a record of Christ's first preaching, focusing on the words "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17; cf. Mark 1:14). In Luke's account the equivalent story is embedded in Jesus' first miraculous intervention in the disciples' fishing, where they caught so many fish the net was breaking. That story records Peter's profound experience of Christ's holiness and of his own sin that led him to cry out, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8). The point is that it is impossible to follow Christ without repentance.

How could it be otherwise? Jesus is the holy, sinless Son of God. He has never taken one step in any sinful direction. He has never led the way into a single sinful thought. So anyone who is following Him, not some imaginary Jesus, must by definition have turned his back upon sin and set his face toward righteousness. Christians do sin. When they do they must confess it and turn from it, being restored to fellowship again. But anyone who thinks he can follow Christ without renouncing sin is dreadfully confused. And anyone who claims to be following Christ while actually continuing in unrighteousness is deluded. And he or she is not a Christian.

3. *Submission.* In one of Jesus' most important sayings about discipleship, which we will study more carefully in the next chapter, the Lord pictures discipleship as putting on a yoke. This suggests a number of things, but chiefly it suggests submission to Christ for His assigned work. It is the picture of an animal yoked to others as well as to a plow.

A yoke is also the connection between submission and subjection. "Submit" comes from the two Latin words *sub* (meaning "under") and *mitto, mittere* (meaning "to put" or "place"). So submission means putting oneself under the authority of another. "Subject" also comes from two Latin words, in this case *sub* (meaning "under") and *iacto, iactare* (meaning "cast" or "throw"). It means being *put under* the authority of another. In other words, although the first word has an active sense (I put myself under another's authority) and the second word has a passive sense (I am placed under that authority), the idea is nevertheless essentially the same. Moreover, it is connected with "yoke" in this way. In ancient times it was customary for a ruler, when he had conquered a new people or territory, to place a staff across two upright poles, perhaps four feet off the ground, and require the captured people to pass under it. By this act they passed under his yoke or submitted to his authority. When Jesus used this image He was saying that to follow Him was to submit to Him. It was to receive Him as Lord of one's life.

4. *Commitment.* The fourth element in following Christ is commitment, for the simple reason that it is impossible to follow Christ without being committed to Him. A lack of commitment means deviating from His path or falling away from Him. On the other hand, it is impossible to be committed to Christ without following Him, for a failure to follow really means being committed to some other thing or person.

Surprisingly, this has become a hotly contested issue today on grounds that teaching commitment to Christ is to add something else to faith, which is a false gospel. This is the view, for example, of Charles C. Ryrie, former dean of doctoral studies and professor of systematic theology at Dallas Theological Seminary. He writes, "The message of faith only and the message of faith plus commitment of life cannot both be the gospel; therefore, one of them is a false gospel and comes under the curse of perverting the gospel or preaching another gospel (Galatians 1:6-9)."³ Those who hold to this position do not deny that commitment

3. Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1973), 170.

is a good thing in and of itself or that it is necessary for growth in the Christian life. But they do deny that commitment stands at the beginning in the sense that one cannot really be saved without it. They would even take issue with a lordship of Christ expressed as “willingness to commit one’s life absolutely” to Him, the implication being that it is possible to believe on Jesus as one’s Savior from sin without willingness to follow Him.

Three arguments are advanced in support of the above line of thought. First, Scripture contains examples of believers who were not completely committed to Jesus and yet were saved. Peter resisted Christ’s authority (Acts 10:14). Barnabas disagreed with Paul over whether they should take John Mark along with them on a second missionary journey (Acts 15:39). Certain believers at Ephesus apparently refused to give up their magic charms and books for as long as two years after they had become Christians (Acts 19). Lot was saved and was declared a righteous man by God even when he was living in Sodom (2 Peter 2:7–8).

The issue, however, is not whether believers sin. Obviously they do. It is whether they can come to Christ in faith while at the same time denying or resisting His lordship over them. It is that which is impossible.

A second argument is the meaning of the word *Lord*. It is reasoned that in reference to Jesus, Lord means “God Jesus” or “Jehovah Jesus.” Since *Lord* means “Jehovah,” all other meanings are excluded, according to this view. Particularly, it does not mean “Master.” But *Lord* does mean Master. That is why a word that was originally used on the human level to denote one who is sovereign over slaves is used of God. Jehovah is called Lord because He is Master, He is the sovereign Master, hence, the *Kyrios* of which all other *kyrioi* are but shadows. Who is God if not Master? If God is not sovereign, He is not God. No other God than the sovereign God is presented to us in the Bible.

A third argument is the one suggested earlier, namely, that to insist on the lordship of Christ in salvation is to require something other than the work of Christ. It is to add works to faith, which is, as all true Christians confess, a false gospel. Dr. Ryrie seems to have this in mind as he concludes, “If you are ever tempted to add something to the uncomplicated

grace of God, first try making it crystal clear who is the Object of faith and what is its content. Then point men to Him, the Lord Jesus, the God-Man Saviour who offers eternal forgiveness to all who believe.²⁴

Yet that is precisely the point on which all true believers insist. We do not wish to add anything to Christ's finished work; it is for that very reason that we direct believers to the Lord Jesus Christ. But He is the *Lord* Christ. This Lord is the object of faith and its content. There is no other. Consequently, if faith is directed to one who is not Lord, it is directed to one who is a false Christ of the imagination. Such a one is not the Savior, and he will save no one.

Moreover, there is the meaning of faith itself. Is "faith" minus commitment a true biblical faith? We remember that the apostle James goes so far as to insist—in a passage some have erroneously thought contradicts the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith—that a faith without works is dead (James 2:17, 26). Such "faith" is useless (v. 20), worth nothing (v. 16). It is a claim to faith only (v. 14), not a genuine faith, which comes of God and expresses itself in works that please Him. But if that is true—if faith without works is dead—how much truer it is that faith without commitment is also dead. True faith involves these elements: *knowledge*, upon which it is based; *heart response*, which results from the new birth; and *commitment*, without which "faith" is no different from the assent of the demons who "believe . . . and shudder" (James 2:19). No one is saved by a dead faith. But a living faith is faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior, for the Lord is the Savior and the Savior is the Lord.

One must be appreciative of the concern Dr. Ryrie and those who think like him have to preserve the purity of the gospel. We agree wholeheartedly that any addition to the perfect work of Christ by sinful men and women perverts the gospel and is destructive to Christianity. If works enter into salvation in any way, those who trust in them are not saved by Jesus and are lost. All true Christians agree in that. But any attempt to divorce Christ as Savior from Christ as Lord also perverts the

4. Ibid., 181.

gospel, for anyone who believes in a Savior who is not the Lord is not believing in the true Christ and is not regenerate.

5. *Perseverance.* The final important element in following Christ is perseverance. This is because following is not an isolated act, done once and never to be repeated. It is a lifetime commitment that is not fulfilled here until the final barrier is crossed, the crown received, and it and all other rewards laid gratefully at the feet of Jesus.

Is salvation something that takes place in the past, something that is taking place now, or something that is to take place at the Lord's return? The answer is that all three are salvation and that isolating any one is an error fatal to the preservation of the gospel. Salvation took place in the past. So it is right to say that Jesus saved us by His death on the cross. His death redeemed His people. His blood made atonement for their sins. But this is not the only way the Bible speaks of salvation. It also speaks of a present element, of our "being saved" (1 Corinthians 1:18). Moreover, it looks forward to a time when by the continuing grace of God we will be saved utterly. With that blessed end in view it admonishes us to persevere in our commitment. Jesus said, "All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matthew 10:22). Peter spoke of growth in godliness and concluded, "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:10–11). Paul said, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12b–13).

All this is to say that discipleship is not simply a door to be entered but a path to be followed and that the disciple proves the validity of his discipleship by following that path to the very end. David wrote about it in Psalm 119. The section that begins, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path," ends, "My heart is set on keeping your decrees to *the very end*" (vv. 105, 112, my emphasis). That is it! The true disciple follows Jesus to the end of everything.

Whoever Will May Come

In the last years of the seventeenth century a French aristocrat wrote a book on discipleship that became a classic in the field. At one time the book was publicly burned in France. Yet it has been received by millions who have judged it one of the most helpful books ever written. It was loved by Fénelon, Count Zinzendorf, John Wesley, and Hudson Taylor. This aristocrat was Madame Jeanne Guyon. Her book bears the title *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ* (French title: *Le Moyen Court et Tres Facile de Faire Oraison*). As she wrote this classic, Madame Guyon had a high standard of discipleship in view, but at the same time she was aware that the call to follow Christ was not some circumscribed invitation to be delivered only to a special body of believers or to all believers only as a second step in their religious experience. On the contrary, it is the essence of faith, and the invitation to come to Christ as a disciple is for all. She wrote:

If you are thirsty, come to the living waters. Do not waste your precious time digging wells that have no water in them. . . .

If you are starving and can find nothing to satisfy your hunger, then come. Come, and you will be filled.

You who are poor, come.

You who are afflicted, come.

You who are weighted down with your load of wretchedness and your load of pain, come. You *will* be comforted!

You who are sick and need a physician, come. Don't hesitate because you have diseases. Come to your Lord and show him all your diseases, and they will be healed!

Come.⁵

That is the invitation that Christ's call to discipleship holds for every person. To be a Christian is no light matter. It is a call to a transformed life

5. Jeanne Guyon, *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ* (Goleta, CA: Christian Books, 1981), 2. Original edition about 1685.

and to perseverance through whatever troubles may arise. It may be the hardest thing anyone can do. Yet anyone can do it, with Christ supplying the necessary strength. In the end it is the only thing that really matters.

Will you take that path?

The Master is going before you. He is looking back at you with a most compelling gaze. He is saying, "Come!" He is commanding, "Follow me!"