

Discipleship

From the American Heritage Dictionary:

disciple *n.*

- 1 *a. One who embraces and assists in spreading the teachings of another.*
 b. An active adherent, as of a movement or philosophy.
- 2 Often **Disciple** *One of the original followers of Jesus.*
- 3 **Disciple** *A member of the Disciples of Christ.*

*Middle English, from Old English *discipul*, and from Old French *desciple* both from Latin *discipulus*, pupil, from *discere*, to learn.*

Our bishop has set the theme for the coming year in our ward of Discipleship. He asked his daughter and son-in-law to speak on the topic of Discipleship in church, and both ended up citing frequently the words and example of Neal A. Maxwell. Along with the efforts I have been making in my life recently this has caused me reflection on the meaning of true discipleship.

It is instructive to look at examples from the scriptures. Peter is one of the first individuals who comes to my mind. He was a fisherman. Of his life and nature before meeting Christ we can surmise but little. However, the accounts in the gospels give us a fairly consistent picture of a man who desires to do good, but is prone to acting before thinking things through completely. For instance, when walking to Jesus on the water¹, Peter's first response was driven by an utter faith in Christ, without considering the unlikelihood of being able to walk on the surface of the sea. I am pricked by that response, and I think there is some truth there from which I should learn. The Savior asks me to do things that I would not normally consider in and of myself. Do I respond to the invitation without worrying about what I think is possible?

Peter, under the constant tutelage of the Lord, may sometimes appear weak and unsure. However, after Christ's ascension into heaven we see Peter in an entirely different light. Healing the lame man at the Gate Beautiful² shows us someone of complete faith, who understands the boldness which is required by true the humility of one who follows Christ. What makes the difference? We can point to the gift of the

1 Matthew 14:29

2 Acts 3:1

Holy Ghost, or perhaps the physical absence of the Lord so that Peter had to act alone. However, I think the underlying message is that we are expected to grow in our discipleship, and that what limited us last week may no longer apply this week as we grow and mature.

The epistles of Peter give us the latest and most intimate look into the life of this disciple. He speaks of faith³, love⁴, steadfastness⁵, and many other qualities. The key, though, is that every thought and counsel is centered in Christ⁶. That returns to the definition of the word “disciple”, but is also a practical key to a disciple's life: every act must be centered in Christ.

As I have considered my own discipleship these points come to me forcefully. I have thoughts of my own regarding what I would like to accomplish. I am not, by nature, an industrious person. I would rather sit and read a book, or play with a variety of toys, or program the computer, instead of working – at anything! I am afraid of discipleship because it could require me to depart from these plans for myself. But what does Peter teach me? First, to act as requested, without trying to conform the request to my preferences⁷. Second, to recognize that I am not going to get it right all at once⁸. Finally, if I center all action – even when I think I am pursuing my own agenda – on Jesus Christ, I will receive blessings beyond what I could produce on my own⁹.

The path of discipleship, although not easy, is designed to bring me the maximum joy and fulfillment, both in this life and in the eternities. Faith in Christ will drive me to follow his path, trusting that he knows what will serve me best.

Another disciple whose example moves me is Nephi. Although all of his writings that have survived in the Book of Mormon are from his mature adulthood, we still catch echoes of the progress he underwent to become the disciple he was at the end of his life. In the first chapters of 1 Nephi we see the discovery as to why he believed the teachings of his father when his brothers found it so hard¹⁰. He concentrated on desiring truth and light, and was rewarded with belief. In 2 Nephi 4 we

3 1 Peter 1:5-9

4 1 Peter 1:22

5 1 Peter 2:19-25

6 2 Peter 3:18

7 Luke 5:4,5

8 Mark 14:72

9 1 Peter 1:3,4

10 1 Nephi 2:12,16

find his mental process as he struggled with feelings of anger and discouragement. Again, the key is centering his trust in the Savior, and not in himself¹¹. Nephi warns about trusting in the arm of flesh, and I think the most dangerous arm of flesh is my own. Nephi also shares another insight which should sustain me in my discipleship – I should not be discouraged¹². There is opposition, and things will not come all at once. But the Lord did not send us here to be sad. He sent us here to live and teach the gospel, which is the good news. That is supposed to induce joy, not sadness. If living the gospel, or being a disciple, doesn't bring joy, then we are missing the point.

That last thought leads into the experiences of another Book of Mormon disciple – Alma the Younger. In his life, similar to Paul the Apostle, we see one who actively opposed the Lord¹³, but upon conversion, became a fearless defender of the faith and missionary for the word¹⁴. However, there is one instant in Alma's life that focuses on this idea of joy as part of discipleship. In Alma 8 he attempts to teach the people of Ammonihah, but is rejected by them, causing him great sorrow. As he is leaving the city an angel appears to him. The first words of the angel¹⁵ (even before identifying himself as the angel who originally called Alma to repentance) is:

Blessed art thou, Alma; therefore, lift up thy head and rejoice, for thou hast great cause to rejoice; for thou hast been faithful in keeping the commandments of God from the time which thou receivedst thy first message from him.

Alma was truly concerned about the people, as well he might be. But their wickedness was not to direct his attitude. Although we may well feel sorrow for the wickedness of the world, we are still blessed in Christ, and as a consequence should rejoice. Discipleship is supposed to consume all else, leaving us as uniquely creatures of Christ.

Now I don't suppose that this means that our lives as disciples will be rivers of uninterrupted bliss. Alma still had to face the martyrdom at Ammonihah¹⁶. Paul faced multiple imprisonments and strenuous hardships¹⁷. But discipleship determines who we are and how we act,

11 2 Nephi 4:34

12 2 Nephi 4:30

13 Mosiah 27:8; Acts 9:1,2

14 Mosiah 27:32; Acts 9:22

15 Alma 8:15

16 Alma 14:8

17 1 Corinthians 11:24-27

not people nor circumstances around us.

So how do we do this in practical terms? After all, most of us are not full-time ministers of Christ. We have to work, and clean the house, and raise children, and be involved in a thousand other details of day-to-day life. However, this is how Christ intended our lives to be. At least a part of the challenge is to become disciples while involved in the humdrum details of life. The answers are so simple that they may easily be overlooked¹⁸.

- Pray multiple times every day.
- Study the scriptures.
- Attend church meetings.
- Magnify callings.
- Participate in covenants – especially the sacrament and the temple.
- Serve others.
- Remember Christ always.

Discipleship is a process. We use the specified actions to focus ourselves, but our desires have to be molded to those of the Lord before we are truly on the path. The actions help train us, but our heart is what we give to God. When the final judgment comes, and we stand before Christ to give an account of our lives, the actions will simply be a reflection of what we have become¹⁹ - disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

18 2 Kings 5:11,12

19 Dallin H. Oaks, "The Challenge to Become," *Ensign*, Nov. 2000, 32