

# TRULY MY DISCIPLES

John 8:31-32

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“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:31-32).

The recent news has been dominated by the nation’s financial crisis and the plummeting of stock prices on Wall Street. People often want to know the Christian perspective on such events. One perspective was given by a friend of mine after attending his Christian college reunion. A classmate reported that he had been praying for a friend, who works in the financial services industry, to attend his evangelistic Bible study. After a year of invitations, his friend has agreed to attend the study and hear the biblical message of Jesus. The reason was that the turmoil in his working life has made him start to think about God. This Christian remarked, “A couple of weeks ago I told my wife that I would give anything for this friend to come to my Bible study, and as it turns out, I just about have!” He was referring to his own financial losses, all of which seemed insignificant compared to the needs of his friend’s soul.

That perspective echoes the attitude of Jesus himself, as evidenced in the events of John 8. In the midst of Jesus’ debate with the Pharisees, John records, “many believed in him” (Jn. 8:30). How wonderful it is that Jesus immediately interrupted his debate to address these professed believers. This tells us that Jesus is far more interested in the single soul that believes than in empires or institutions. The words that Jesus spoke on this occasion are important not merely for these particular new believers, but they present his essential call to converts in all places and times. Addressing these new believers,

Jesus speaks of *discipleship proved*, *discipleship experienced*, and *discipleship blessed* with the freedom only he can give.

## DISCIPLESHIP PROVED

All through the Gospel of John we encounter two kinds of belief: true and false. At several places we encounter a false faith that responds positively to Jesus but is not received by him as genuine. This occurred during Jesus' first visit to Jerusalem, after he cleansed the temple and performed many miracles. John tells us, "Many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them" (Jn. 2:23-24). We sometimes describe faith as "accepting Jesus." But far more important is that we should be accepted by him! For this, Jesus demands not a false and fleeting affirmation, but a true and enduring faith.

This seems to be the issue with these "believers" in Jerusalem after the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus had declared himself to be the light of the world, and in his dispute with the Pharisees had again declared his deity. This produced a positive response from at least some of the on-lookers. Perhaps they voiced their approval of what Jesus said or showed disapproval of the Pharisees. But it had yet to be determined whether theirs was a true or a false faith.

The same is true today when people respond positively to a gospel message. As Jesus did here, we always want to encourage the least expression of faith. But we must also recognize that it has yet to be determined whether such people are, as Jesus said, "truly my disciples" (Jn. 8:31). The only thing that proves true discipleship is a faith that endures. And this does not happen in every case. Martin Luther explains, "There are others who hear [the Gospel]; but when the battle grows hot, they declare: 'Upon my soul, should I forsake this or that for the sake of the Gospel?'" An unabiding faith is not true or saving faith. Jesus insists, Luther says, "My doctrine demands more than just an initial acceptance and much praise. I know that it is easy to believe in the beginning. But where are those who remain steadfast, who persevere, endure, and say: 'Let come whatever God

send me!... Whether I live or die, I shall remain with Christ'?"<sup>1</sup> It is the latter, and only they, who are truly Jesus' disciples.

There is, according to Jesus, a single condition that demonstrates the truth of our discipleship: "If you abide in my word" (Jn. 8:31). It is not enough to have warm feelings towards Jesus or to find some of his teachings agreeable. We are reminded again, having seen this many times in John's Gospel, that Jesus is not interested in gathering large numbers of loosely committed admirers. Instead, he seeks and calls for true disciples, that is, those who abide in his Word.

The word "abide" is a significant one in the Gospel of John, especially in Jesus' teaching on the vine and the branches in chapter 15. The ordinary meaning of "abide" is to remain, continue, or dwell. But Jesus also has in mind the idea of a life connection. He said, "I am the true vine... Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me" (Jn. 15:1-3). Jesus' concern, therefore, is not merely that we should continue to call ourselves Christians, but that we should abide in his word in the way that a branch abides in the vine. The branch receives its life from the vine and bears the fruit of the vine. Likewise, Jesus says that true disciples are those who find their life in his Word and in that way bear his fruit. Again, linking this abiding to true discipleship, Jesus said, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (Jn. 15:8).

True faith in Jesus receives salvation immediately – anyone who truly believes in Jesus is forgiven of his sins and justified before God on the spot. But the truth of our faith – its validity – is proven only as we continue and abide in the life and Word of Jesus. It is in this sense that abiding is the condition of true discipleship. In John's Gospel, we encounter many who come to Jesus with a fickle faith. In fact, these "believers" of John 8 are mainly composed of such false converts. Before the chapter is over, most of those who "believed" are picking up stones to throw at him (Jn. 8:59). But Jesus seeks and approves only a faith that demonstrates its truth by abiding in him.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 6-8*, Luther's Works, v. 23 (St. Louis: CPH, 1957), 392-393.

This calls for a serious point of application. Ours is a day in which the “faith” of many so-called Christians consists mainly of verbal assent. We respond positively to Jesus and perhaps delight in his promises. But are you abiding in his Word? Is the Word of God the food for your soul in which you constantly abide? Is your “faith” in Jesus high enough among your priorities that you devote yourself to serious Bible study? And is the Word of God increasingly manifesting godly fruit in your life? Is your character changing? Are your habits being reformed? Has your attitude towards time, relationships, money, and speech been molded by the teaching of Jesus and the prophets and apostles who have written on his behalf? If the answer is “No,” then you have real cause to question the reality of your faith. If the answer is “It’s hard to tell,” then you also have cause for alarm. “If you abide in my word,” Jesus insists, “you are truly my disciples.”

Jesus once told a parable that illustrated the difference between the two kinds of “faith.” He described four kinds of soil on which the seed of God’s Word falls. The first three depict those who are shown not to be his true disciples. The first was a hard path, and the seed lay there until it was taken away by birds. This depicts the open unbeliever, who neither understands nor accepts God’s Word. The second soil was “rocky ground, where they did not have much soil.” In that case, the seed quickly sprang up... but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away” (Mt. 13:5-6). This depicts those who receive the gospel with joy, but in whom the truth of Christ does not penetrate deeply. The result is that “when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word,” such people fall away from following Christ (Mt. 13:20-1). The third soil was infested with weeds and thorns. “This is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (Mt. 13:22).

All three of these soils depict something less than true discipleship; none of these people are saved. This shows us the context in which our discipleship must be proved genuine. It is a world in which the great mass of people do not receive or understand God’s Word. It is a world in which believers will suffer trials and persecution. It is a world in which the thorns of worldly cares and temptations threaten

to strangle the seed of faith. Are these things happening to you? Then beware! Only the good soil – that prepared by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit – proves genuine. Here again, Jesus points to the abundant fruits of true spiritual life as the only proof of true discipleship: “This is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty” (Mt. 13:23).

The doctrine that describes what Jesus is teaching is called the doctrine of “the perseverance of the saints.” This says that true faith always endures to the end and bears the fruit of God. D. A. Carson simply states, “Perseverance is the mark of true faith, or real disciples.”<sup>2</sup> Those who persevere are those who adhere to the teaching of Jesus Christ. They trust in his gospel for their very souls and they direct their lives by the whole counsel of God in the Bible. They do not turn aside for the treasures of the world; they do not lose interest by becoming preoccupied with the affairs of life. Instead, they abide in the life of Jesus which they receive through his Word. Psalm 1 says of the man or woman who abides in God’s Word, “He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither” (Ps. 1:3).

None of this means that a true disciple does not go through stronger or weaker periods of faith. This does not say that a true disciple of Jesus never falters or stumbles. What it means is that a true disciple gets up, turns back to the path on which Jesus is leading, returns to the Word for truth and life, and comes over and again to Jesus for cleansing, renewal, forgiveness, and strength.

One who did not persevere was Henry of Navarre. A member of the French royal family, Henry was also a professed Christian and a member of the Huegenots. These were the Reformed Protestants who once were so numerous in France but who suffered under vicious persecution. The Huegenots looked with hope to Henry as one who would establish the gospel in their land. But then Henry received the opportunity to ascend to the throne, if only he would renounce his faith and revert to Roman Catholicism. Henry agreed, declaring,

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<sup>2</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 348.

“Paris is worth a mass.” Like Paul’s associate Demas, Henry fell away because he was “in love with this present world” (2 Tim. 4:9).

A better example is that of Polycarp, the aged bishop and martyr of the early church. On February 22, 156 A.D., Polycarp was taken by the Roman authorities to stand in the arena. Out of respect for Polycarp, who as a boy had heard the gospel from the lips of apostle John himself, the officials tried to persuade him to avoid death by renouncing Christ. Polycarp refused, explaining, “For eighty-six years I have been (Christ's) slave, and he has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”<sup>3</sup> With these words, Polycarp submitted himself to the wild animals and he was killed in the arena.

How is it that true Christians abide in Christ’s Word and endure to the end – even to an end like this? The answer is that true disciples persevere in faith because of God’s preserving grace in their lives. James Boice writes, “God is faithful in preserving his people... The saints persevere only because God perseveres with them... The followers of Jesus Christ will be faithful to him because he is faithful to them. God said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you' (Heb. 13:5; cf. Deut. 31:6). Jesus told his disciples, 'Surely I will be with you always to the very end of the age' (Mt. 28:20).”<sup>4</sup>

## DISCIPLESHIP EXPERIENCED

**T** rue discipleship is not something that happens only at the beginning and end of our Christian lives, however. Rather, it is the life-long experience of all who truly follow Jesus. Jesus described this life: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth” (Jn. 8:31-32).

The Christian life is one of increasing enlightenment in truth. Jesus said, “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light” (Jn. 8:12). Much of the thrill of walking with Jesus is to have our eyes increasingly opened to see truth. We come to him having lived in darkness, being deceived by lie upon lie. But as we abide in his Word, we find that God renews us by the transforming of

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<sup>3</sup> James M. Boice, *Romans*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, ), 3:1196.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:1395.

our minds (Rom. 12:2). John Calvin explains this process that takes our entire lives: “It is the same unvarying truth which Christ teaches His own from first to last; but first He enlightens them with small sparks, as it were, and finally pours out a full light upon them.”<sup>5</sup>

Are you experience this increasing enlightenment? Are you regularly made aware by God’s Word of ways in which you have been misled and deceived? Does your devotion to the study of Scripture make you feel like a man or women being let out of the basement of this world and increasingly led up the staircase into the well-lighted rooms above? If not, how much you are missing! In what folly and ignorance you must inevitably be leading your life! If you have not experienced this, then make the words of Psalm 119:105 a solemn resolution for the future: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” Stop giving your mind to the false teachings of the world. Start devoting yourself seriously and prayerfully to studying God’s Word and let the light shine into your mind and heart. If you will, truth after truth will build a new foundation for a new life, and you will start to bear the fruit of a true disciple of Jesus.

What is “the truth” to which Jesus refers? The truth is first and foremost Jesus himself. “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” he declared (Jn. 14:6). To know the truth is always to know Jesus. “This is eternal life,” he prayed to the Father, “that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn. 17:3). We come to know a personified truth, our Savior Jesus.

But the truth also involves his gospel and the doctrines of salvation taught in the Bible. Jesus says that by abiding in his Word, we will know the truth of salvation. This is why the church’s life is always impoverished when Christians neglect the great doctrines of the Bible. We are to have it straight in our minds how sinners are justified through faith in Christ and how it is that saints are called and empowered to live in holiness. It is always weak and impoverished Christians who demand that preaching be only practical, and who have no interest in God, in the person and work of Christ, and the apostolic teaching about salvation and life. Martyn Lloyd-Jones rightly stated, “False doctrine makes joy in the Lord impossible. If

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<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 4:221.

our faith is not true and right, we can never experience the blessings of salvation, so we need to understand the teaching of the Bible with regard to doctrine and practice.”<sup>6</sup>

The disciple of Christ who abides in his Word comes to know the truth generally. He does not become a no-it-all. But he comes to understand life. He knows that the world is bound in sin and he is not surprised by trials and evil. He looks to the world to come with the return of Christ and places his hope there. She makes use of her time to be useful to Jesus and the gospel work of his kingdom. In this way, the true disciple abides in Christ’s Word and learns the truth.

Since “disciple” means “learner,” the truth of God’s Word is a genuine believer’s greatest treasure. People complain about Christians who always talk about the Bible; sometimes they say we worship a book. But Jesus says the opposite. He says that by abiding in his Word we follow him. Therefore what Christians and churches today need most is not numbers, not money, and not worldly power. We need the truth that we find only by abiding in Christ’s Word. It is “more to be desired... than gold, even much fine gold,” says David, “sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb” (Ps. 19:10). By the Word of Christ, our lives are transformed, and by the teaching of the Word of Christ faith is brought to life in others.

## DISCIPLESHIP BLESSED

**T**True discipleship is tested and proved by abiding in the Word of Christ. True discipleship is experienced as our lives are increasingly enlightened in the truth of Christ’s Word. This true discipleship is then blessed through this same truth. Jesus concluded, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:31-32). This is the great promise that comes from the lips of Jesus to all who learn from him as true disciples: “The truth will set you free.”

Freedom is one of the great synonyms for salvation. To be saved is to be set free by Jesus Christ. At the start of his ministry he announced his intention: “To proclaim liberty to the captives” (Lk. 4:18). By

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<sup>6</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Life of Joy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, ), 19.

shining his truth Jesus frees us: by abiding in his Word we know the truth; and by knowing the truth our lives are set free.

William Barclay identifies four categories in which true discipleship results in freedom. The first is freedom from fear. The Civil War general Stonewall Jackson was once asked how he could be so fearless amidst the perils of battle. He answered by referring to his knowledge of the truth. “The day of my death has been appointed by God. I am as safe on the battlefield as I am lying in bed.” Fear cripples Christians and restricts our freedom for serving God. Young people are afraid to be different from their peers; wives are afraid to submit to their husbands; couples are afraid to tithe of their income. But knowing the truth of God’s goodness and care and power frees us from such fears. Paul reminds us of the truth: “My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

A second freedom is from self. Knowing the truth of a glorious, heavenly kingdom, the chains of selfishness and pride are loosened. Since the Word of God is “living and active” (Heb. 4:12), we gain power to rise above our limitations and weakness and live in the freedom of the life to which we are called.

Thirdly, knowing the truth sets us free from other people. The truth shows us that the world is wicked, and that the esteem of the world is often not worth having. Knowing Jesus and his gospel, we value his opinion and we look forward to our coming day of vindication.

Lastly, the truth frees us from sin. “Sanctify them by the truth,” Jesus prayed; “Your Word is truth” (Jn. 17:7). Paul writes, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). Barclay explains that through the truth, “discipleship breaks the chains which bind us to our sins, and enables us to be the person we know we ought to be.”<sup>7</sup>

How does truth set us free? Little children are set free from the fear of closets when they learn the truth that goblins do not exist. The timid soul is freed from the terror of hell when he learns that Christ’s blood has paid the debt of his sin. The dying believer is set free from

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<sup>7</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:25.

spiritual torment, knowing that through his faith, Jesus Christ awaits across eternity's veil. The truth is the gospel of grace, and that gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

That is why we must know the truth! When Abraham Lincoln signed the *Emancipation Proclamation*, the slaves were not then set free. It was when they learned the truth that they took off their chains. When they learned that the war was over and liberty had been proclaimed, then the truth set them free. Likewise, we must know the truth of the victory of our Savior and the mighty grace that has provided the liberty of salvation.

## ENCOURAGEMENT FOR WEAK FAITH

Whenever true discipleship is discussed or the doctrine of perseverance is taught, many genuine believers will be made uneasy. They see the Bible's teaching that they must bear fruit and endure in the faith, and looking at their own weakness they begin to doubt and fear. But Jesus' teaching is not a cause for doubt, but an encouragement to any faith. He promises that if you abide in his Word, you will come to know his truth and the freedom he offers.

To be sure, genuine faith will always display certain tell-tale characteristics. Here, Jesus insists that a true disciple will abide in his Word. Does that describe you? Do you delight in the Bible, even though once you thought it irrelevant or boring? If you do not have a desire to study God's Word – if your profession of faith has not led you to walk long in the paths of Scripture – then you might ask if your faith is genuine and if your salvation is real. But if this is true of you – if you are drawn to God's Word – if you find that its promises are precious, its warnings fearful, and its truths inspiring to your soul – then you may take comfort that you are a true disciple. Now abide in that Word, as a branch abides in the vine. In this way, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. You will experience the greatest freedom there is – the only true freedom – to fellowship with God, to offer your life in service to his glorious kingdom, and to experience the spiritual blessings of heaven within your soul.

