

# On a Mountain Side

by G.W. North

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*Jesus teaches that true discipleship requires being drawn to Him by the Father, making a voluntary choice to follow Him, and reproducing the Christ-life in oneself through obedience to God's word.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 11:28, John 6:35

**Topics:** "Commitment to Christ", "Discipleship"

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## Description

G.W. North emphasizes the significance of true discipleship as demonstrated by Jesus during the miracle of feeding the five thousand. He explains that Jesus carefully orchestrated this event to teach profound truths about commitment and the nature of following Him. The sermon highlights that discipleship requires a deep conviction of spirit, not just a passive following, and that true followers must be drawn by the Father and willingly choose to follow Christ. North warns against the dangers of superficial beliefs and stresses the necessity of understanding the cost of discipleship, as many turned away from Jesus after His challenging teachings. Ultimately, he calls for a genuine imitation of Christ's life and teachings as the essence of true discipleship.

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## Transcript

The next specific reference to discipleship made by Jesus is in connection with His great miracle of feeding the five thousand from just five loaves and two small fishes. It was a marvellous occasion, mind-staggering to say the least, and John tells us the Passover was at hand. Jesus had carefully planned the event; He Himself set the scene and timed it to perfection; 'He knew what He would do', John says. Reading the other Gospels we can ascertain how easily the Lord manipulated events; He handled situations masterfully to teach men truth as it became necessary for them and as they could bear it. Truth taught before the time can so easily become destructive instead of beneficial to the pupil; understanding and knowledge are cumulative and to be advantageous lessons must be carefully graded. The Lord was sent to be the teacher of Israel; Nicodemus, the Rabbi or teacher of Israel, recognised that and called Jesus 'Rabbi'. Greater than Nicodemus, Jesus is the teacher of the world, though whether at that time Nicodemus submitted to Him is dubious; he certainly did not become an avowed disciple then. God's command is that all must learn of Him or perish, it is decided .... all who will are about to learn a lesson from this incident, which, at peril of death, must never be forgotten.

The timing of the lesson is very important. The three synoptists place it following the empowering and authorisation and sending forth of the twelve on their first itinerant ministry and their subsequent return to

the Lord. One other thing of note, having bearing upon the miracle and the Lord's teaching, is also mentioned by two of them, namely the execution of John Baptist; a lot of his disciples were adrift in the land and probably were among the multitudes fed by the Lord that day. Almost certainly these would have known the twelve, for some of them had previously been followers of John and had left him for Jesus; being devout persons themselves these men would have been observing the one their master had declared to be the Christ, wondering whether they should throw in their lot with Him or look for someone else (see Matt. 11 v.3). There was a great deal of unrest and uncertainty among the people as to the merits and demerits and claims of John Baptist and Jesus; Herod, who had ordered John's execution, had himself become inquisitive about Jesus and the activities of His apostles too. Herod was wanting to know what was going on in his kingdom, especially as he was answerable for his actions to Pilate, his political overlord.

Something was in the air, crisis-point was being reached, decisions had to be made and directions taken and Jesus knew it; the time had come for followers and disciples to be sorted out and apostles faced with reality. It has to come to all of us. Hazy ideas, vague beliefs and woolly notions about true discipleship and total commitment will not do for Jesus, they have to be swept away, people must know what they believe in order to be a disciple, so He set about bringing them to a decision. He was no popular teacher, He was the Son of God and the people had to know it. He was not prepared to allow false notions or current opinion or feeble inconclusiveness to rule men's destinies; the dominant factor in discipleship is not an insatiable appetite for learning, it is conviction of spirit. Discipleship is not drifting, neither is it the cultivation of an easy-going spirit which loves comfortable living; discipleship is hard and the time for hard sayings had arrived; a man must be resilient. With typical foresight therefore, and with great care, the Lord, by His almighty power, laid the gracious foundation for the hard sayings He had to speak. He knew they were revolutionary and would offend many and that religionists and die-hard doctrinarians and all the self-opinionated would find His words objectionable and would revolt from Him and fade away; the time of estimation and elimination and election and establishment had come. It was a crisis time deliberately brought on by Christ; He was prepared to face it and so must we be. The Lord performed the astonishing miracle for this purpose; all would-be disciples must face the fact that every miracle the Lord performs on their behalf is not only a display of power and proof of His love, it is also in some degree a test.

The Lord Jesus never did miracles simply to display His power or merely to draw attention to Himself; here we find evidence of that fact. He had compassion on the multitude; they were hungry and He fed them for that reason, but not for that reason only; He fed them because they were as sheep without a shepherd; they had no-one to lead them into the living pastures. Nicodemus had not done so, Pharisees and scribes and lawyers and priests and kings and elders could not do so either, and even John Baptist who had given them direction and motivation for a while had never performed one miracle and now he was dead; where was their leader and shepherd? They could not lead or feed themselves. Jesus therefore commanded them to sit down while He fed them and they ate till they could eat no more and had to leave of His abundance; then, having fed them, He challenged them as to His leadership. Shepherd He was, they could hardly deny that, but could they, would they follow Him? He tested them out completely about this -- every single person there, including His chosen apostles, had to face it; none was exempt, no-one was allowed to hide behind election or to plead privilege.

The miracle He performed was perfectly acceptable to them -- they all loved and admired Him for it. To many it confirmed their beliefs that He was the most remarkable person in the land if not in the world, and speculation about Him and His identity was rife. Some even thought He was a re-incarnation of an old

prophet; they had no doubt about His capabilities and all the multitude were prepared to elevate Him to sovereignty -- if necessary take Him by force and make Him king -- such was His popularity and power with the people at that time. But, needless to say, Jesus had not performed the miracle primarily for those reasons; He did it as an object lesson and in order to create the right conditions for the challenge He had to bring and the greater things He had to say. The miracle, beside being an object lesson to the participants, was also the text from which He preached the astonishing message that He was the bread of God and of life from heaven which they must eat; it was this message that did the damage. As people heard it they were absolutely shattered; they just could not receive it. He lost the goodwill of multitudes of people by it and their attitude toward Him radically changed.

What Jesus said was revolutionary in the extreme, there could be no doubt about it, He had set out deliberately to do what He did; they were thoroughly disillusioned. He referred back to the history of the nation and talked about Moses and the manna their fathers ate, and they knew that many of the things He said were true, but when He insisted that He was the bread of God sent down from heaven and that they must eat thereof if they wanted never to die, they were not so sure. If He had stopped there all may have been well even though they were shaken, but He went on and many of His disciples were horrified to hear Him say His flesh was meat indeed and they must eat it and His blood was drink indeed and they must drink it. He had gone too far for them, the concept was too much for them, their minds reeled under it and their beings revolted against it; for one thing it was absolutely contradictory to God's word through Moses, for another it was impossible and for another it did not make sense. But He persisted with it and when He said quite deliberately, 'except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood ye have no life in you', it just about finished them; and worse was to come. He actually said, 'I said unto you that no man can come unto me except it were given unto him of my Father'. That did it. Did He really want disciples? 'From that (the word 'time' is not in the Greek) many of His disciples went back and walked no more with Him'. They went back from that saying and that truth.

This was one of the great testing times of Christ as well as of the disciples; He found no pleasure in causing offence to people, especially disciples; but He just had to do it. Every disciple and every 'would-be' disciple has to face the fact that he can only come to Christ if and when the Father draws him: no-one else can really come and no-one else can draw him. Too many people have come to their own image of Christ and are following an imaginary Jesus; they have never faced reality; they are living in a world of religious fantasy; it was so in Jesus' day as well as our own and He knew it then as He knows it now. He also knew that the Father draws men away from the popular idol Jesus to the real Christ, the Son of Man and of God; because He loved men and women He had to tell them the truth, they had to be faced with spirit and life and blood and flesh, both His and theirs. This is so important to everybody that upon that occasion He turned to the chosen twelve and said, 'will ye also go away?' He gave even them the opportunity to leave Him too, but they couldn't do it: 'Lord to whom else shall we go?' they said, 'Thou hast the words of eternal life'. Peter was the spokesman for the apostles as he so often was, 'we believe and are sure that Thou art that Christ the Son of the living God'. They knew who they were following and what they wanted and they were under the drawings of the Father; their discipleship had been tested, they had passed through a critical phase with flying colours, but much greater tests lay ahead.

Three solemn things lie before us; each of them is of equal importance to everyone who wishes to be a disciple; every single person must: (1) be drawn to Christ by the Father; (2) be called and chosen of Christ; (3) voluntarily choose to follow Christ. None but these are disciples. In this tremendous section of teaching by the Lord we are shown the most fundamental factor of and reason for discipleship, namely the

imitation of Christ. By this it is not intended that men should think of pretentious imitation, or mimicry, which is nothing but vain hope and self-deception, but of the reproduction of the Christ-life in themselves by the power and grace of God. Christ was not addressing Himself to the carnal appetites or fleshly ambition of men but to their spirits and their life. Everything He said was an issuing of His spirit and a statement of His life, as well as an utterance of His lips; in this instance it was an unfolding of His means of life -- why and how He was what He was. Here it is as He said. it, 'the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father', that is discipleship; He was Himself the Apostle, the Sent One, in other words God's Disciple. Everyone therefore who would be a disciple must imitate that. Again here are His exact words more fully, 'As the living Father hath sent me and I live by the Father so he that eateth me shall live by me'. He looked to, listened to and obeyed His Father; He did what His Father said, copied what His Father did; in other words He followed Him. That is discipleship as Christ revealed it.

The man who seeks Jesus must seek Him as a hungering, thirsting man searching for food and drink in order to live. Until a man realises he can only live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God he will never be a disciple of Jesus Christ, for He was all those words in manifestation, He was the Word, God's ultimate Word to man. There has to come a time when the hard, solid truth has to be faced. Soft gentle truth we all love. We love the idea of being a lost woolly sheep and the Good Shepherd finding us, but He reserved that truth till later, lest sentiment blind us to reality. Green pastures are nice and good for sheep, but His sheep are men and He is God and we must be God's Sons. New birth translates the truth found in human types and figures, where men are grass and their glory the flower of grass, into eternal reality, where Christ is God's bread and His children's meat, and humans are made divine. These are great things, but disciples must learn them or go away. He does not wish any man to draw back from the Father's drawings. His inquiry to the twelve must have been full of pleading, 'please do not go away, O please I want you to come on with me -- all the way'. He had called them, they were held by far more than an attraction to Him; a disciple must know in his heart that he is specially wanted and must make his response.

The Lord Jesus was an absolutely honest man. He kept truth always before the people and those who followed Him most closely heard it most often. In different ways, under contrasting figures and with varying emphases, He made men and women count the cost of discipleship carefully. Other writers bring this out according to their insights into the particular themes the Lord pursued in course of His teaching about discipleship and John reports the Lord as saying further, 'if ye continue in my word then are ye my disciples indeed and ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free'. It is quite obvious that, having set a course for His disciples, all His successive words about it must be as clear and uncompromising as ever and these are certainly of the same spirit and calibre as any of His former remarks. He is speaking to believers and at that time there were many of them -- believers like followers and hangers-on must be shown the truth. Believing must lead to certain results which may be seen and known of all men or it is in vain. Believing is necessary, but it must be the right kind of believing or it avails nothing in God's sight and profits the believer nothing.

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