

The Pool of Siloam

by G.W. North

Discipleship is a voluntary change and definite switch of the heart by the power of God from one line of believing to another, and it is characterized by a willingness to obey the Lord's voice, even when it is not outwardly visible.

Scripture: John 9:1

Topics: "Spiritual Transformation", "Discipleship"

Description

G.W. North explores the profound implications of the miracle at the Pool of Siloam, emphasizing that true discipleship begins with a heart change initiated by God, as exemplified by the blind man who became a disciple before fully understanding who Jesus was. The sermon highlights the contrast between outward appearances of faith and genuine belief, illustrating how the blind man's obedience led to his healing and spiritual awakening. North underscores that discipleship is not merely about following Jesus physically but involves an inward transformation and a personal relationship with Him. The message encourages believers to recognize the importance of hearing and obeying the voice of the Lord, regardless of their circumstances or past. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deeper understanding of what it means to be a disciple in the spiritual sense, moving beyond mere outward actions to a heartfelt commitment to Christ.

Transcript

In its initial phase discipleship consists in a voluntary change and definite switch of the heart by the power of God from one line of believing to another. This is brought out to us clearly in the account of the miracle wrought on the man who was blind from birth. It is a very precious record of truth, simply told, which in its unfolding brings out the amazing fact that a man can be a disciple of Jesus in his heart before he properly knows who He is and commits himself to following Him. Earlier we learned what is required of a follower of the Lord and the effect on His disciples of the words, 'Except ye eat my flesh and drink my blood ye have no life in you'. Outwardly they were visibly and perhaps also professedly following Him, but in mind and heart they were not and the Lord knew it, so with one hard saying He divided between the sheep and the goats -- He always will.

It was not so with this man though; when the Lord first met him He was escaping from them and their murderous designs on His life, bypassing a lot of other men in doing so. But when He saw this man, under an impulse from the Spirit Jesus stopped, for He knew He must work a work of power on him. He was walking in the light of life of which He had spoken so He could see. He knew a potential disciple when He

saw one, even though the man was blind at the time. The way the miracle was performed is unique in scripture; neither during nor after it was the man called or commanded to follow Jesus; on the contrary he was told to go. He did so and came seeing -- the miracle was completed upon his obedience, but that was only a beginning. There followed such a state of fear and pandemonium, with arguments and denunciations and quarrelling on every hand that it may well have been thought by an observer that a terrible crime had been committed. Such is the power of prejudice. It seems the poor man had always posed a problem since the day it was discovered that he was born blind. O the superstition that bound the hearts and minds of God's people in those days. Even the disciples were bound by current religious and doctrinal error, though they had followed the Lord many a month and had watched Him at work and had listened to His teachings. It came out of their mouth by universal consent, 'Master, who did sin, this man or his parents that he was born blind?' They actually thought that the man's blindness was a result of or punishment for his parents' or his own sin. The Lord quickly dispelled that erroneous idea, 'Neither hath this man sinned nor his parents', He said, 'but that the works of God should be made manifest in him. I must work', and He did, in the broad light of day.

Just what effect this had on the disciples is not told, but it had a mighty effect on the man. Had the disciples eyes to see and ears to hear and a heart to understand, the events they witnessed were an illustration of what He had been trying to teach them earlier. The miracle was an instance of a man believing the Lord, continuing in His word and knowing the truth and being made free (from blindness). How many of those disciples who had been following Him for months had a comparable testimony, or even one remotely like it? We cannot help how we were born, we cannot choose our parents, but we can choose whether to obey or disobey the Lord. Although a man is not born physically blind he can still have a real testimony of Christ's miraculous power working in him. All disciples without exception must have a clear basic testimony, every one must be able to say with this man 'I know'.

He made no pretence of knowing the things they thought he ought to know, he simply told the truth and in doing so testified to Jesus. Doing that he gave clear evidence that his heart had become convinced of truth deeper than the miracle, beyond the power that gave him power of sight. Whether or not he recognised it, the Pharisees saw it easily and were convinced that he was now a disciple of Christ; they were right, so he was. Without walking so much as one step to follow Jesus physically he was a true disciple, even though he did not know who He was when he eventually met Him. The man was a disciple in heart as soon as he obeyed the Lord. Whether He says 'Come' or 'Go', obey Him; it is the first step in discipleship. As we have already seen, one who knew Jesus better than any at that time said, 'Whatsoever He saith unto you do it', we could not be better advised, even by the Holy Ghost Himself.

It is hard not to believe that the Lord was thinking of this man when He told His famous story of the Jewish sheepfold and His sheep, for it appears He was talking to the same people when He revealed Himself to the man as the Son of God. This parable is the only one of Jesus' many stories that John records, and it would be more than a little strange if it is not included here without some connection with what the Lord had just done. The parable is in fact an introduction to the greatly loved truth He wanted to tell about the goodness of the Shepherd of Israel. The Lord felt the people should now hear it; the miracle presented Him with the perfect opportunity, for it was an outstandingly suitable example of what He wanted to show them. Therefore He tells His story which everyone should read, for wonderful it is.

What a masterly storyteller Jesus was; He was an absolute genius at gathering up all the elements of truth He wished to illustrate and weaving around them a gem of a story. The parable is all about the voice, in fact the word occurs three times: the voice the sheep hear, the voice the sheep know and the voice they

do not know. It is also about the sheep being led and being put forth and following their shepherd and refusing to follow a stranger. It was a simple enough parable, absolutely true to life, but His hearers did not understand a word of what He was saying, even though they had witnessed the perfect demonstration of what He meant. The man was blind; he could not see the one who spoke to him, put clay on his eyes and told him to go and wash in Siloam. Everyone would have agreed that Jesus was a complete stranger to him, but somehow, for some reason beyond natural desire to see, that man obeyed Him. When Jesus later found him excommunicated from the temple and said to him 'dost thou believe on the Son of God?' his attitude is most striking, 'who is he Lord that I might believe on him?' He knew that the one speaking to him was the Lord -- he had never seen Him before, but the voice was the same -- 'thou hast both seen Him and it is He that speaketh with thee'; 'Lord I believe', he responded and worshipped Him then and there as the Son of God.

That man was a sheep and a disciple and a worshipper all at once, a living testimony, he became a perfect illustration and typical example to all that Jesus was the Shepherd of the sheep. Sheep will not follow strangers; they do not know their voices, but like this man they have to be prepared to pay the price and fulfil the conditions of discipleship -- they must be put forth from the sheepfold. The Lord put this man forth: He knew He would and intended to do so when He put clay on his eyes; the authorities had excommunicated Jesus and they excommunicated His sheep also. This is inevitable if the group, religion or national religion is anti-Christ, that is anti the Christ of truth. All Christ's true disciples are put forth and led out of something or somewhere if they follow Jesus, but they are not afraid about it for He calleth them by name and they know His voice and He goeth before them. This too is part of what He meant when He said, 'if any man will come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me'. If a man is a stranger to the cross, Jesus is a stranger to him.

The importance of hearing the voice of the Lord cannot be over-emphasized, the truth of it can be misunderstood but not over-stressed. As long as we understand the difference between the voice that is natural and outward and the voice that is spiritual and inward we shall be safe. It is the same also with discipleship -- inward spiritual discipleship is what the Lord is seeking and not primarily that which is outward. It was only to be expected that men would actually follow the Lord when He was manifest in the flesh; He purposely set out to be a visible leader among men and deliberately called them to Himself with this intention. That was all very well and quite proper at that time; by this God made it easier as well as reasonable, so that the idea of discipleship could be sown in hearts by means of that which was visible. John, in his epistle, pays tribute to the benefit he received by the Word being made flesh for this purpose: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and our hands have handled of the Word of life; that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you'.

This is the way he speaks of his own experience; he was first called, then became a disciple and then an apostle. But afterwards, following Calvary and Pentecost, he passed beyond the outward experience into fellowship with God and when that happened he ceased entirely to speak of following the Lord and introduced the word that described his relationship with God, the Father and the Son. He was no longer following in the sense in which he followed as a disciple when Jesus was manifest in flesh on earth, but in a different way -- he was walking with Him in fellowship in the Spirit. He said so, 'our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son', and he wrote his epistle so that, like those earliest apostles, we also may have fellowship with the Father and the Son and with each other.

John has sown the seed of this truth in his Gospel, for although Jesus, being a man, was led of the Spirit and was taught of God and in the truest sense was the Disciple and the Apostle, beyond all that men saw He walked in unbroken fellowship with His Father. This is the thing that gripped John about this wonderful Man; he 'beheld His glory, the glory as of an only-begotten with a father'. This is why the word disciple is never used in scripture of Jesus. Even the suggestion of the idea was obnoxious to John Baptist; that is one of the reasons he at first so strongly refused baptism to the Lord. Everybody he baptised became his disciple and it could never be that Jesus should be his disciple; the very thought of it was almost blasphemous to John. Yet Jesus insisted on being baptised. He knew He had to fulfil all righteousness and baptism is one of the indications of submission to discipleship. In His case though it was not to John Baptist as a man but to His Father and the Holy Ghost and also as confirmation of John's ministry. All righteousness was in the act and all the time Jesus was fulfilling His ministry among men He was a learner, that is a disciple, and because He was Himself a learner He called men to learn of Him in the yoke of discipleship.

His was a spiritual discipleship, He had no visible leader or teacher, only the inward one; in this he was our perfect example, for the whole point of outward discipleship is to lead men to inward discipleship. This is part of the reason why He said to Nicodemus 'ye must be born again'. Nicodemus had said to Him 'we know that thou art a teacher come from God'; he was right, but by His answer Jesus immediately countered the beginnings of an erroneous idea in the man's mind. All men need to be born from above so that the inward teacher who speaks within with an inward voice might come to them -- that is why Jesus said it. There is no outward visible leader today, there is no outward audible voice calling, it is the era of the invisible Holy Spirit who speaks within. People must follow Christ within now; discipleship cannot now be practised apart from fellowship with the Lord, but this privilege no-one knew while He was with them in the flesh.

We gather some hint of the superiority of the inward over the outward in this matter of discipleship by making reference to the Bethany home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Nowhere is it recorded or even suggested that those three were disciples of Jesus. It is lawful to suppose that each of them, or all of them together, may at one time or another have followed Him as did others, but we are not told it was so. Yet who can believe other than that they were His devoted disciples, perhaps more than many another who mingled with and made up the crowds who followed Him about? They loved Him devotedly and He loved them just as dearly and more, yet He never called out one of them by name to become His follower, but chose to let them stay in their home. On one occasion when He called on them there Mary sat at His feet to learn of Him and Martha served Him; upon another visit He raised Lazarus, who both died and rose again believing in Him. In the last days of His earthly life He stayed in their home enjoying their love till He went finally to the upper room and Gethsemane and Gabbatha and Golgotha and the garden tomb and glory. Without question Martha, Mary and Lazarus, though not numbered among His public followers, were inward disciples indeed.

Perhaps one of the greatest helps to a fair assessment of John's nature and personality is the fact that he never directly uses the title 'apostle' of himself. Surprisingly enough it does not even occur in his Gospel when he speaks about his fellow-apostles either, though he loved and respected them very much; he carefully and pointedly clung to the word disciple throughout. Perhaps his purpose for this is to indicate, by the Spirit's guidance and inspiration, where in his opinion the proper emphasis should lie; he was a very humble man. His preference for what may be thought by some to be the humbler title and lower calling is quite marked in his description of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. It seems it was universal with those

men that they did not wish to be called apostles. Paul, who was not a member of the original band, says quite firmly he was not fit to be called an apostle and only called himself by that title when necessary. They were not ashamed of the name -- it was honourably bestowed upon them by the Lord, but it was not bestowed as denoting titular rank, as though to have it were a thing to be sought for or grasped at. In common with the word disciple the name is descriptive; it means 'sent one', and that is how those men bore it; to them and to the Lord it meant they were sent. It was a new name in sacred writ and also in Israel's spiritual history, though prophets such as Isaiah and other great men of old, such as Moses, certainly knew what it was to be God's sent ones.

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