

The Chief Occupation of a Disciple

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of being a disciple of Christ and learning from Him, highlighting the significance of humility and weakness in the learning process.

Topics: "Discipleship", "Jesus Teaching"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks lays the foundation for the sermon by discussing the various names given to the Lord's people in the New Testament, focusing on the title 'Disciples' and the significance it holds both for the learners and the Teacher, Jesus. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the Lord Jesus as the central subject of His own teaching, bringing a revolution in teaching by always relating everything to Himself. The sermon delves into the purpose of Jesus coming into the world, highlighting His role in bringing what man was intended to have but never possessed, and the necessity for disciples to be teachable, empty, and willing to learn from the great Teacher, Jesus.

Transcript

In this initial chapter we shall be laying the foundation for what is to follow. Later we shall be breaking up the whole ground that we shall be covering now, and we shall get to the real application of the Lord's Word, but this chapter will be of a general character, but quite important.

You will know that in the New Testament the Lord's people were called by various names, and these were the names by which Christians came to be known. Most of the names were given to them by themselves, but there were two exceptions. The name 'Christian' was someone's joke. The inhabitants of Antioch, who loved to tack a name on to everyone, found this a very suitable title for these people and so they called them Christians. And then there was another word which was taken over from more common use, and, whilst not particularly their own choice for themselves, it became the name by which they were more usually known than any other.

The various names, as you will remember, were: Disciples; Believers; Saints; Brethren; People of the Way; and Jesus called them 'My Friends'.

There you have six different titles for the Lord's people, and every one of them was intended to embody and convey some special idea. Put the Lord Jesus in the centre, and all these titles indicate that His people are gathered around Him. Around Him are the disciples, the believers, the saints, the brethren, the people of the Way, and those of whom He speaks as 'My Friends'.

It is the first of these titles that is going to occupy us mainly, and it is possible that we will not be able to go beyond this one.

The first title, then, is 'Disciples'. That name had a double implication. There was that which it implied where people were concerned and that which it implied where the Lord was concerned. As to those who were called disciples, it simply meant that they were learners. The title came from a Greek word which just meant 'to learn', but it had an active element in it and signified something more than just learning in the head: it meant putting into practice what was learnt. So disciples were people who learned and then put into practice what they learned.

It is interesting to notice that this name for the Lord's people occurs thirty times in the Book of "the Acts of the Apostles". That means that it was a name which continued after Jesus had gone and indicated that they were still learning and putting into practice what they were learning. We usually think of the disciples as related to the Lord Jesus when He was here, but the name 'disciple' goes on a long time after Jesus went from this world. Indeed, it continues until today, and I do want you to realize that we are here at this time as disciples: those who are learning from the Lord Jesus in order to put into practice what we learn. That is what the name means where we are concerned. We are meant to be the disciples of Christ now.

Then the name carried with it an implication where the Lord Jesus was concerned. Of course, it just meant, and still means, that He is the Teacher, the One from whom we have to learn everything. That name was often used about Him when He was here, and in that capacity He had four names: Teacher; Rabbi; Rabboni; and Master. You will remember that He was called by all those four titles. They addressed Him as 'Teacher' - Nicodemus said: "We know that thou art a teacher come from God" (John 3:2). But He was a different kind of teacher from all other teachers. He was not a teacher of the schools, for His teaching was spiritual, not academic. But this name 'Teacher' carried with it something very important and very rich. We are going at this time to be very much occupied with the Gospel by John, because it is there that we learn more deeply of the meaning of the Lord Jesus. The little phrase 'to know' occurs fifty-five times in that Gospel, and that very phrase belongs to the teacher and to the disciples. It is perfectly clear in the Gospel that the subject is 'To know', for it is all about knowing, and Jesus is the spiritual Teacher.

And then the phrase 'The Truth' occurs twenty-five times in that Gospel. To what does 'To know' relate? "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). So 'the truth' mentioned twenty-five times is linked with 'to know' occurring fifty-five times.

Then another phrase is linked with those two: 'The Light', which occurs twenty-three times. 'To know the Truth by the Light' is the subject of John's Gospel, and, indeed, describes the school of the disciples.

All that is connected with the title 'Teacher'.

The name 'Rabbi' is used separately of the Lord Jesus. In the Gospel by Mark He is called 'Rabbi' three times, and in Matthew four times, but this title is not used once in the Gospel by Luke. You will see why in a moment. In John Jesus is called 'Rabbi' eight times - more than in all the other three Gospels put together. It is quite clear from that what John is really seeking.

'Rabboni' does not occur often. It is an intensified form of 'Rabbi'. You will remember that Mary Magdalene cried 'Rabboni' in the garden on the resurrection morning, when Jesus turned to her and said 'Mary'. It simply means 'the great Teacher' and it only comes in John's Gospel.

But why did Luke leave out this title of 'Rabbi'? In his Gospel the Lord Jesus is called by a fourth title more than He is in any of the others. Luke's favourite title for Him in this capacity is 'Master', and when you remember the object of his Gospel, which was to set forth Jesus as the very perfect Man, then you understand why he preferred this title. Jesus is the Master Man, and Luke meant to say: 'We are all the servants of that Man.'

I have said all that just to introduce this matter of discipleship and to show that the great business of Christians is to learn Christ. This is not just a subject to study. I want to ask you: What is the greatest desire in your life? I wonder if it is the same as mine! The greatest desire in my heart - and the longer I live the stronger it grows - is to understand the Lord Jesus. There is so much that I do not understand about Him. I am always coming up against problems about Him, and they are not intellectual problems at all, but spiritual ones: problems of the heart. Why did the Lord Jesus say and do certain things? Why is He dealing with me as He is? He is always too deep for me, and I want to understand Him. It is the most important thing in life to understand the Lord Jesus. Well, we are here that He may bring us to some better understanding of Himself. The material of the word will not be new - it will be old and well-known Scripture. Perhaps we think that we know the Gospel by John very well. Well, you may, but I do not. I am discovering that this Gospel contains deeper truth and value than I know anything about, and I trust the Lord will make us all see that as we go on.

That has to do with the disciples, who are learners, but what about the Teacher Himself? What is His subject? Every teacher has his subject. Some teach theology, and others teach science, or philosophy, or art, or engineering, or various other things. What is the subject of the Lord Jesus?

(I would like to send you to your rooms to put your answer down on a piece of paper, and I think it would be very interesting if I were to read out all the answers later on!)

However, the answer is: Himself. He is His own subject. Jesus was always the subject of His own teaching. He related everything to Himself. He said: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6): "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:14): "I am the bread of life" (John 6:48): "I am the door" (John 10:9): "I am the resurrection, and the life" (John 11:25). He is His own subject. He spoke about many things, but He always related them to Himself. He said very much about His Father, and we may come to see something of what He taught about Him, but He always related the Father to Himself and Himself to the Father. He said: "I and the Father are one" (John 14:9). He spoke much about the Holy Spirit, but He always related Him to Himself. He said much about man, but He always related man to Himself. His own favourite title for Himself was 'Son of man'. He said much about life, but He always related it to Himself and never thought of life apart from Himself. He said much about light, about truth and about power, but always in relation to Himself. He was His own subject of teaching.

But we are going to see that Jesus brought in a complete revolution in this way of teaching Himself. There is no doubt whatever that Jesus created a revolution. Of course, some people would not have it, for it was too revolutionary for them. But others said: "Never man spake like this man" (John 7:46 - A.V.). And it is said of Him that "He taught them as having authority, and not as the scribes" (Mark 1:22). He brought in a complete revolution, but He did it by bringing Himself into view by what He said about Himself. He was always talking about Himself, and He is the only one in this world who has a right to do that. We are here today because He had a right to talk about Himself.

So the one business of disciples is to know Him, and to do what He called His disciples to do: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me" (Matthew 11:29). Jesus came to bring heavenly knowledge in His own person, and in His person we come into heavenly knowledge. It is not just what He says: it is what He says He is.

Every true teacher is not one who says a lot of things, but one who, when he says things, gives something of himself. You have had teachers at school, and I had many during my school years. Some taught me, or tried to teach me, this and that and something else - it might be arithmetic, or English language, or one of the many subjects. I hope I learned something from what those teachers said to me, but of them all one stands out in my memory. He said all the things, but he also gave me something of himself. I could say of him: 'He did not only talk; he made an impression. He left something with me. I remember him, not for his subject, but for himself. He made a difference in my life.' And that is the kind of teacher Jesus is. He did not just say things, or teach subjects only. His subjects were very wonderful, as we have seen: the Father, the Spirit, life, and so on, but Jesus gave more than words. When people listened to Him they said: "Never man spake like this man." He made an impression on their lives and they carried something away. Afterwards, it says, "they remembered his words" (Luke 24:8). Something had entered right into the deep places of their lives and they were able to say: 'I not only learned certain truths from Jesus, but I have got something in my life from my Teacher. I have been influenced by Him.' Jesus said: "The words that I have spoken unto you are spirit, and are life" (John 6:63). That is something more than words.

The question which covers and governs all learning is this: Why did the Lord Jesus Christ come into this world? Of course, you might answer that in simple fragments of Scripture. You might say: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). That is the Scripture and is quite true. Or you might say: "The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10), which is also quite true. There are many other things like that which seem to answer the question, but you need to put them all together - and even then you do not have the full answer. It has many more aspects than those! We have to approach it by two steps, and the first is a very big step indeed.

The birth of Jesus at Bethlehem was not the birth of the Son of God. He did not begin His existence when He came into this world: He was with the Father before ever this world was. He said: "O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John 17:5). We do not know when He began to have His being, but it was somewhere, if at any time at all, before time began. He was with the Father from everlasting. If you can fix the date of the first words in the Bible, then you know the answer. Perhaps you are wondering why I am saying this? Because this is where the Gospel by John begins, and you can never understand the Lord Jesus until you begin back there: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). That is where the teaching begins. Oh, we have come into a very big school! It is the School of Eternity. We are going to see later on how that applies to us. It is one of the things that I hope we are going to learn, but for the moment we just have to note this: that it was not the beginning of Jesus when He came into this world.

The other step is this: His coming into this world in human form definitely related to mankind. He did not completely break with His deity, but He came in the form of humanity, and that means that His coming had something vitally connected with human life. 'It is not unto angels: it is unto men.' He came as Man to men in order to teach men. God was in Christ, but in human form in order to do something in man: not only for man, but in man. God could have done everything for man without coming in human form, but in order to do something in man he had to come in the form of a man.

The full answer to our question, then, is this: Jesus came to bring in His own person all that which man was intended to have, but never had. Man was intended by God to have something that he has never yet had. He missed it by his disobedience and has never possessed what God intended him to possess. And man as he was never could possess it, so there had to be another kind of Man to bring it to man.

And we repeat: the answer to our main question is just this. Jesus came to bring in His own person all that which God meant man to have, but which he had never had. That is why the teaching of Jesus was always united with His acts. Do you notice that? After Jesus said something He did something to prove it, and He never said anything about Himself without doing something to prove it. Did He say: "I am the light of the world" (John 9:5)? Then He opened the eyes of a man born blind. Did He say: "I am the resurrection, and the life" (John 11:25)? Then He raised Lazarus from the dead. And so He was always uniting His words with acts, His works with His teaching. He was not just saying things, but with the saying He was doing. That still continues to be His method, and is what you and I have to understand. I hope we are going to learn that in these days, and that it will not just be only words, but the works of the Lord Jesus accompanying the words.

There is something that we could just put in at this point which is very helpful. There is something very unusual about this great Teacher. Have you noticed the kind of disciples that He chose? Why did the Lord choose that kind of disciple? What kind of people were they? They were not the great scholars of the day, nor men with university degrees. I think we could say that on the whole they were a poor lot and seemed to have poor brains. They were always misunderstanding what He said, or failing to grasp the point. They were always forgetting things He had said to them and He had to remind them later on, or bring these things back to them by the Holy Spirit. Paul's description of the Christians at Corinth fitted these disciples well: "Not many wise after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble... God chose the foolish things of the world... God chose the weak things of the world..." (1 Corinthians 1:26,27). Now, that is not the way in which the world goes to work. You would not stand a chance today if you were a Peter, or a James, or a John, in any high position in this world. Why did He choose those men? Because there was plenty of room in them for what He had come to bring. They were not already full or strong. In a sense they gave Him a very good opportunity for putting into them what they did not have. The people in Christ's day who had it all never got anything. You know how true that was! The full went away empty and the empty went away full. That is something for us to learn!

One of the things that we have to leave down in the valley when we come up on to the mountain is our ignorance. You will say: 'Ignorance means "I don't know"', but just think again. What is the hallmark of ignorance? It is: 'I know it all.' Is that not true? The really ignorant people are those who think that they know everything.

I remember a certain lady some years ago. I do not profess to be a great teacher, but to every sentence that I uttered she said: 'I know it! I know it!' That would have been all right if her life had proved that she did know it, but it proved that she did not know it, and you could get nowhere with that dear soul because of: 'I know it! I know it!' The mark of ignorance is knowing it all, and that is one of the things to leave down there when we come up on to the mountain.* We must be teachable, empty, weak, foolish in our own eyes, just nobody. The School of Jesus Christ is filled with people like that - and that is why He chose the men that He did.

Let us remember that we are His disciples and still have everything to learn. We really understand the Lord Jesus very little, but He is amongst us as Rabboni, our great Teacher, and I believe that He will

reveal Himself to us if our hearts are open to Him.

* Spoken at the Conference among the mountains in Switzerland.

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