

DISCIPLESHIP

MEMORY VERSE

"Whoever does not bear his cross and follow me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27)

REFERENCES

- "DISCIPLESHIP" by H.H. Pope Shenouda III
- The spiritual servant- a sermon by H.H. Pope Shenouda III

INTRODUCTION

The Christian life is a life of discipleship. Everyone who believes in Christ, is called to be His disciple. Christ was called 'the Good Teacher' and being His disciple is something for all Christians to claim. Jesus had His special disciples who were called "**His own**" (John 13: 1). These were the men whom He prepared for ministering the word (Acts 6:4). It says in the Sermon on the Mount: "*His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them,*" (Matt. 5:1-2).

Preaching the gospel was taken as a means of making disciples. When the Lord sent His disciples to preach the gospel, He said to them: "*... Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them ... teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you;*" (Matt. 28:19- 20). And when Paul and Barnabas went to Derbe, it was said that, "*And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples,*" (Acts 14:21).

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A DISCIPLE

Discipleship is not just a matter of learning particular facts, but rather, is a way of living.

1. Follow the Lord's Teachings

Thus the Lord said to His disciples: "*If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.*" (John 8:31). So then simply listening to the words of a teacher, does not mean that one is his disciple. One has to be firmly grounded in his teaching. This means converting the teacher's words into a life, so that they become principles that are firmly established in the one who is learning.

2. Love others

The Lord Jesus gave us a sign, and a practical example, when He said to His disciples: "*... love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*" (John 13:34-50).

Here the Lord Jesus is laying down a necessary qualification, a standard, without which they would not be considered His disciples. No matter how much they had learned from Him, in theory about life. If people did not find in the Lord Jesus's disciples that mutual love, then those disciples had no right to say that they were disciples of Christ! It was an essential sign.

Just as Christ loved everyone, so His disciples must be like Him. They, too, should behave and "to walk just as He walked." (1 John 2:6). "*As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another*" (John 13:34-50). When the Jews prided themselves on being sons of Abraham the Lord replied: "*If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham.*" (John 8:39). Such is true with discipleship- it is manifested in a person's way of living.

3. Leave everything for His sake

And in taking this point further when His disciple Peter asked him: "*... we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?*" (Matt. 19:27). The Lord answered: "*And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.*" (Matt. 19:29).

So it is a basic principle, then, in discipleship for the Lord, that you leave everything for His sake, or that you are at least ready in you heart to leave everything, without feeling any regrets.

4. Endurance

This is why the Lord added another necessary condition, which is that: "*No one, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.*" (Luke 9: 62).

Being a disciple of the Lord needs steadfastness upon the way, with no turning back. It requires that a person be ready to endure for the sake of the Lord and His ministry, and that he should work hard for that purpose.

Thus the Lord says: "*... And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.*" (Luke 14:27)

5. Humility

It begins with a person feeling that he needs to learn, to ask and to seek guidance.

Anyone who wants to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus must take on what he has heard, been taught and carry it out. Thereby transforming what he has learnt in theory into his practical life. What use are words if we just listen to them and then forget them, or memorise them just for the sake of information?

The fathers used to say: '**Tell me a word which I might live by,**'.

PEOPLE WHO COULD NOT BE CONSIDERED HIS DISCIPLES

The Lord Jesus provided examples of this:

For instance, He said: ***"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple."***

And ***"So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple."*** (Luke 14:26,27,33).

In this way Christ laid down the foundation for those who would be His disciples.

LIFE OF DISCIPLESHIP

The ear is not the only mean of learning- the eye is too. Discipleship is not only to learn from the word of your teachers but from their behavior and way of life. Even when they say nothing, you still absorb their way of living. So, in fact, one should be a disciple of silence as much as for beneficial words. This is what St. Anthony did at the beginning of his monastic life. He used to learn from the life of the hermits by observing them.

Just as you learn from people's virtues, you can also learn from their faults. If you see something that is not right, and notice its repercussions on others, you can learn from it by making sure that you avoid it in your own life.

Discipleship need not be hampered by a person's age or situation.

Our problem, however, is that we imagine that we already know something, or that we have reached a point at which we do not need to ask or learn any more, yet we find a group like the Lord's apostles asking Him, on one occasion: ***"Lord, teach us to pray."*** (Luke 11:1). Who was there who did not know how to pray? Everybody knew. The apostles asked about a matter, which seemed perfectly clear, but the result was that the Lord taught them the Lord's prayer, which was certainly of great benefit to them.

From this we can deduce that one of the characteristics of discipleship is humility.

It begins with a person feeling that he needs to learn, and to ask, and to seek guidance. That person then goes on to have the feeling that someone else has greater understanding than he, and that God is able to guide him through that other person.

One of the necessary conditions of discipleship is that we must take care to remember what we have heard and keep it within us, and not forget it. As the prophet David said: ***"Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You!"*** (Ps. 119:11). Forgetting an instruction is likely to make us fall into sin, and make us forget those principles and values, which we wanted to learn. Therefore the Lord says: ***"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart."*** (Deut. 6:6). All this is so that we won't forget them.

Being a disciple means that you gain knowledge that is then transposed, through your practicing various spiritual exercises, into a stage of being practically applied. By practicing such exercises you will be putting what you have learned constantly before your eyes, and it will warn you whenever you are likely to break your new pattern of thought, or behaviour and fall back into old ways.

DISCIPLESHIP FROM BOOKS

The basis of discipleship is learning from the fathers and teachers. As a poet once said: "Take knowledge from those who possess it, but seek wisdom from the wise."

But what happens if you don't find a teacher, father or guide? Then, books can provide you with good guidance. However, a person must choose carefully the books which he reads and from which he learns, and must read them selectively and not embrace unquestioningly all of what he reads. The reader must keep before his mind what St Paul said: "*Test all things; hold fast what is good.*" (1 Thes. 5:21).

Nowadays, we remember the name of Habib Girgis who, on finding no teacher in the Theological College who could teach him knowledge, resorted to books and eagerly consumed their information. This enabled him to become the first teacher of theology of his generation, and to write various books on doctrine, spirituality, the lives of the saints, and textbooks for church teaching and religious instruction. His only source of learning was books.

A person also needs to distinguish between just reading, and actually putting into practice what he is reading about. There are certain spiritual principles for which one needs guidance in knowing how to put them into practice. And some virtues might also require a step by step approach and gradual progression over a long period of time, in order for you to put them into full effect.

Learning from books has two sides to it: knowing it in one's mind, and living it in one's life. And in order to integrate what you have read, you have to practise spiritual exercises.

Read and make sure that you fully understand. And extract those spiritual concepts, which are most beneficial and appropriate for you. Discipline yourself to do them, and be responsible for practising them.