

CHRIST'S PERSISTENT CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

21 After this Jesus again revealed himself to the disciples,[this time] by the Sea of Tiberias. He revealed himself in this way. ²Simon Peter, Thomas, (who is called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the [sons] of Zebedee, and two [more] of his disciples were [all] together. ³Simon Peter said to them, I am going fishing. They replied, We will come with you. So they went out and got into the boat; but that night they caught nothing. ⁴At daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus called out to them, Children, do you have any fish? They answered him, No. ⁶Then he said to them, Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find [some]. They did so, and now they were not able to haul in the net because of the large number of fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, It is the Lord. So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he wrapped his outer garment around him, (for he was naked), and jumped into the sea. ⁸But the other disciples came in the little boat, towing the net [full] of fish; for they were not far from the shore, only about one hundred yards away. ⁹When they got to the beach they saw there a fire of burning coals with fish laid on it, and [some] bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, Bring [some] of the fish you have just caught. ¹¹So Simon Peter climbed aboard [the boat] and hauled the net to shore; it was full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three. But even though there were so many fish, the net was not ripped. ¹²Jesus said to them, Come and have breakfast. None of the disciples dared to ask him, Who are you? They knew that it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This is now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵After they finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, [son] of John, do you love me more than these [others love me]? He replied, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. He said to him, Feed my lambs. ¹⁶[Jesus] asked him again a second time, Simon, [son] of John, do you love me? He replied, Yes, Lord; you know that I love you. He said to him, Take care of my sheep. ¹⁷[Jesus] asked him the third time, Do you love me? And [Peter] said to him, Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you. Jesus said to him, Feed my sheep. ¹⁸I tell you the truth, When you were young, you dressed yourself and walked wherever you wanted. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. ¹⁹Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. After saying this, [Jesus] said to him, Follow me.

²⁰Peter, turning around, saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following [them]. (This is the one who had leaned back on [Jesus'] chest at the supper and had asked, Lord, who is going to betray you?) ²¹Upon seeing him, Peter asked Jesus, Lord, what about this man? ²²Jesus answered him, If I want him to remain [alive] until I come [back], what is that to you? Follow me. ²³Therefore the word was spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, If I want him to remain [alive] until I come [back], what is that to you? ²⁴This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who recorded them; and we know that his testimony is true. ²⁵There are also many other things that Jesus did. If each one of them were to be recorded, I suppose that not even the world itself could contain the books that would be written. (Jn. 21:1-25)

Introduction

Let me tell you the Parable of the Wild Horse.

Out in the high country of California, far removed from the massive metropolises of the coast, there roamed a band of wild horses. One day, as that band of wild horses roamed the rugged and beautiful wilderness, they wandered into a box canyon. While they were grazing in this box canyon, a lightning storm struck, setting fire to the dry underbrush and dead trees. In a matter of minutes the wild horses found themselves caught in the midst of a fiery inferno with no way of escape.

Now it just so happened that at that very time a wealthy horse breeder from southern California was himself roaming through the high country, enjoying its rugged beauty. The blazing fire and the frantic, terrified screams of the wild horses attracted him and his companions to the box canyon. In the course of that fearful afternoon, suffice it say, he managed to rescue one of those wild horses—at the risk of his own life.

He and his men took that horse with them back to his ranch in southern California. In the weeks and months that followed, that rancher undertook the arduous task of breaking that wild horse; seeking to train it for the purpose he had in mind.

Through the course of that time the wild horse resisted the whole process: it refused to receive a saddle, it bucked furiously whenever a cowboy got onto its back, on several occasions it jumped over the fence and tried to run away. But on each occasion the rancher, who was now the owner of this wild horse, went after it, brought it back, and continued to train it for the purpose he had in mind.

Finally, after months of what oftentimes seemed to be a hopeless, futile struggle, the horse was broken; it was finally domesticated, it had finally learned to love, respect and obey its new master. And now it was ready to fulfill the purpose envisioned for it by its master from the beginning: it was ready to go before all the others, having the honor of accompanying its master in leading the Grand Tournament of Roses Parade on New Year's Day.

This parable of the Wild Horse helps illustrate for us a key element in the passage of Scripture presently before us: We must appreciate the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ persistently calls His people to a life of discipleship—training us for that great purpose of becoming like Himself and sharing in His glory. If you have been redeemed by Christ, be assured that He will persistently call you to a life of discipleship.

I. Christ will Call You to Discipleship, Whenever You Revert Back to Your Former Lifestyle

The incident described in John 21 took place *“by the Sea of Tiberias,”* located on the west side of the Sea of Galilee near the town of Tiberias. At the conclusion of the Passover celebration in Jerusalem, it would be quite natural for the disciples to return to their homes in Galilee. Furthermore, they may still have had some fear of the Jews.

But notice their failure to comprehend what Jesus had said to them: *“Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, so [now] I am sending you”* (Jn. 20:21.) Note, too, their failure to comply with their Lord’s command: *“I am going to send you what my Father has promised [namely, the Holy Spirit]; but stay in the city [i.e.; Jerusalem] until you have been clothed with power from on high”* (Lk. 24:49.)

We find these men once more gathered together in their old familiar surroundings as partners and associates in the fishing industry. They have gravitated back to their former home and their former occupation, they are drifting back and settling into their old way of life. The “Jesus experience” is quickly wearing off; now that they have had their encounter with the risen Christ, they are settling back into the old familiar routine. As the New Testament commentator, Leon Morris writes, “The general impression left is that of men without a purpose” (*The New International Commentary, The Gospel of John*, p. 862)

Now at Peter’s initiative, these seven set out on a fishing excursion—but the entire night is spent without success: they caught nothing. But with the first rays of early morning sunlight, the men can distinguish a solitary figure standing on the beach. The man on the beach calls out to them, *“Children, do you have any fish?”* They simply reply, *“No.”* They are tired, discouraged, and perhaps at this point somewhat depressed about their future—they are in no mood to strike up a conversation with a stranger.

The man on the beach now instructs them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat, assuring them that by so doing they will have a catch of fish. Perhaps it was due to his commanding tone, perhaps it was with hope in the word of his promise, but whatever the case, they follow his instructions. As a result, they were now unable to haul in the nets, they were so full of fish: 153 large fish!

It is the beloved disciple, John, who is the first to recognize the true identity of the stranger on the beach—and it is Peter who is the first to act upon this information: he puts on his outer garment and jumps into the water. We are told that the fishing boat was only about 100 yards from shore.

When the men have anchored the boat and have reassembled on the beach, they find fish frying on a crackling fire. Although He has fish frying, Jesus instructs the men to supply some of their fresh catch. He wants to focus their attention on the miraculous catch and the fact that it serves as an illustration of the spiritual harvest they are being called to gather in for Him.

Notice the striking parallel between this present passage and the initial call of these men to discipleship as it is recorded in Luke 5:4-11,

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, Go out into the deep, and let down your nets for a catch. ⁵Simon answered and said, Master, we labored all night and caught nothing. However, because you say so, I will let down the nets. ⁶When they had done this, they caught such a great amount of fish that their nets were breaking. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But Simon Peter, when he saw it, fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. ⁹[He said this because] he and all who were with him [in the boats] were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken; ¹⁰and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, Fear not; from now on you shall catch men. ¹¹After they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him. (Lk. 5:4-11)

Just as Jesus initially called these men to discipleship, so now He renews that call.

As Christians, we must understand that Jesus will persistently call us to discipleship whenever we revert back to our former lifestyle. We must appreciate the fact that the purpose of our redemption is discipleship; as Jesus clearly indicates in His giving the Great Commission:

*Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore **go and make disciples** of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Matt. 28:18-20a)*

The invitation He extends to us is an invitation to become His disciple: ***“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls; ³⁰for my yoke is easy and my burden is light”*** (Matthew 11:28-30.)

Whenever the “Jesus experience” begins to wear away, whenever we begin to settle back into our old familiar routine, (with its focus upon this present world and our own personal life,) we will find the Lord Jesus calling us back to discipleship.

II. Christ will Call You to Discipleship, By Reminding You of Your Divine Calling

After the disciples have finished breakfast, Jesus turns to Peter and asks the question, ***“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”*** Note that two different Greek words for “love” are used by Jesus and Peter respectively in this dialogue. Jesus begins by using the word, ἀγαπάω, the connotation of this type of “love” is a

devotional love; a self-giving, sacrificial love; it is the word for love that occurs in John 3:16, *“for God so loved (ἀγαπάω) the world, that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but shall have eternal life.”* Peter consistently uses the word, φιλέω, the connotation of this type of “love” is affection, warm feelings and friendship—the Greek word for “friend” (φίλος) is derived from this word for “love.”

Jesus now addresses to Peter the question, *“Simon, son of John, do you love (ἀγαπάω) me more than these [others love me]?”* Jesus is asking, “Peter, do you have a greater love for Me, a greater devotion to Me, than do these other men?” Jesus is alluding to Peter’s self-confident claim he had made on the night when Jesus had announced His impending arrest: *“Even if all [of them] fall away on account of you, I never will”* (Matt. 26:33.)

Peter replies to Jesus’ inquiry, *“Yes, Lord; you know that I love (φιλέω) you!”* Peter strongly affirms his affection for Jesus and appeals to Jesus’ own knowledge as proof of that affection; even though the actual record of Peter’s actions indicates a betrayal and denial of such affection and friendship. Proverbs 17:17a tells us, *“a friend loves at all times.”* This is in striking contrast to Peter’s denial of the Lord three times on the night of His arrest and trial. Peter chooses to ignore the record and appeals rather to Jesus’ knowledge of the deep feelings of affection and friendship that he holds within his heart for the Lord Jesus. Jesus does not rebuke Peter; rather, He instructs him, *“Feed my lambs.”* The Lord is entrusting Peter with a sacred ministry.

Then the whole cycle of questioning starts over again. Jesus asks a second time, *“Simon, son of John, do you love (ἀγαπάω) me?”* Jesus wants Peter to focus on the significance of the word, ἀγαπάω, the word for devotional, self-giving love. Jesus is emphasizing to Peter the type of love He is concerned to find exhibited in the lives of His disciples, note John 14:15, *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”* This time, by omitting the phrase, *“more than these,”* Jesus calls Peter to focus on his own relationship with Jesus without comparing his love and devotion with that of any other disciple.

For a second time Peter replies, *“Yes, Lord; you know that I love (φιλέω) you!”* Upon receiving Peter’s reply, Jesus again issues the command, *“Take care of my sheep.”* He again issues the command that entrusts Peter with a sacred ministry.

Then the cycle is repeated one last time: *“Simon, son of John, do you love (φιλέω) me?”* Note that this time Jesus uses the same word for “love” that Peter has been consistently using. Jesus is saying to Peter, “Do you truly have affection for me? Are you truly my friend?” If so, Peter must consider the characteristic of a true friend as it is defined by the Lord Jesus: *“No one has any greater love than to lay down his life for his friends”* (Jn. 15:13.) Peter must exhibit this kind of love in his relationship with the Lord Jesus.

Peter is grieved that Jesus should repeat His question three times, and that this third time He should ask Peter, "Do you really love me as a friend, do you really have affection for me?" For the third time Peter appeals to Jesus' knowledge of all things to confirm that Peter, indeed, does love Jesus. In response, for the third time Jesus instructs Peter, "*Feed my sheep.*" Jesus is calling upon Peter to demonstrate his love for Him by carrying out the sacred ministry to which He is calling him.

Jesus now proceeds to speak a solemn word of prophecy to Peter:

I tell you the truth, When you were young, you dressed yourself and walked wherever you wanted. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. (Jn. 21:18)

Peter's youth and his present life have been characterized by impulsiveness and self-will; he was in charge of his life: he dressed himself and he went where he desired to go. But what lies ahead for Peter is helplessness, (someone else will dress him,) and restraint (someone else will lead him where he does not desire to go.) In verse 19 John interprets these words of prophecy to be a reference to Peter's future martyrdom. So it is revealed that Peter must bear the very cross he so despised and sought to avoid. Peter must submit to the very fate he once sought to deter the Lord Jesus from accepting:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. ²²Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Never, Lord! he said. This shall never happen to you! (Matt. 16:21-22)

Having explicitly informed Peter of what lies before him, Jesus now renews His initial call to discipleship, "*Follow me.*"

As Christians, let us be assured that Jesus will persistently call us to discipleship; reminding us of the divine calling He has given us. Jesus has given to us the divine calling to follow Him, no matter what that might entail:

Then he said to them all, If anyone would be my disciple, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me; ²⁴for whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. (Lk. 9:23-24)

Jesus has called us to the sacred ministry of serving Him. The Apostle Paul explains how this applies to the Christian's everyday life when he exhorts the Colossians, "*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the LORD, not for men*" (Col. 3:23.) He explicitly calls upon one member of the church to be diligent to fulfill the specific ministry entrusted to him by the Lord Jesus:

“And tell Archippus, ‘See to it that you complete the work you received in the LORD’”
(Col. 4:17.)

III. Christ will Call You to Discipleship, Because Our Commitment is so Inconsistent and Wavering

Apparently, to impress upon Peter this renewed call to discipleship, Jesus at this point got up and began to walk away. Peter, literally heeding the LORD’s call and desiring to demonstrate his commitment, got up and began to follow Jesus. But as he does so, Peter begins to wonder about the rest of the group. He turns around, he sees John also following, and he inquires, *“Lord, what about this man?”*

Notice what has just happened. Within moments of responding to Christ’s call, Peter has failed again. He has literally stopped following Christ and has turned his back on Christ. As Peter stands there in this embarrassing position with his back to Christ and his finger pointing at John, Jesus declares, “Why should that matter to you? **You** follow Me!”

As Christians, we may be assured that Jesus will persistently call us to discipleship because our commitment is so inconsistent and wavering. We can so easily become sidetracked by getting caught up in the life of this present world. Our prayer needs to be that of the hymn writer, John E. Rode,

O let me feel You near me,
The world is ever near.
I see the lights that dazzle,
The tempting sounds I hear.
My foes are ever near me,
Around me and within.
But, Jesus, please draw nearer,
And shield my soul from sin.

Like Peter, we can so easily become sidetracked by concentrating on what other Christians are doing, instead of concentrating on Christ and what He has called us to do for Him. But we must heed the word that Christ first spoke to Peter, *“What is that to you? Follow me”* (Jn. 21:22.)

Conclusion

We must appreciate the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ persistently calls His people to a life of discipleship—training us for that great purpose of becoming like Himself, as He declared during the days of His earthly ministry: *“The disciple is not above his teacher; but every one when he is perfected shall be like his teacher”* (Lk. 6:40.)

As He calls us, let us respond to Him, personally taking to heart these words of Scripture:

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. ⁹Do not be like the horse [self-willed] or the mule [stubborn and resistant]. (Psl. 32:8-9a)

The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." (1 Sam. 3:10)