

Three Kinds of Discipleship

**And a Fourth Kind
No One Can Do**

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Naples, Florida

About this Booklet

Discipleship is a Bible topic long viewed by me and many others as largely misunderstood. For one thing, the apostle Paul never used the word “disciple” in his Epistles. The Greek word, *mathetes*, cannot be found in any of his writings. I don’t take this to mean Paul wasn’t a disciple or that his readers were not disciples but it raises a question about the terminology. Jesus said a lot about discipleship. Luke used the term “disciple” many times in the book of Acts although never with the demands Jesus expressed. After the book of Acts there are no more occurrences of this vocabulary. The time was unique when Jesus was here on earth with unbearable pressures ahead for his followers. They didn’t know it, but Jesus did, that his arrest, trial and crucifixion would be more than they could bear. Matthew states that “*they all forsook him and fled.*” Jesus was very upfront about it, showing that following him fully would be more than his followers could expect to fulfill.

Discipleship in the Landscape of Preaching Today

Today, those demands are mistakenly assumed by some preachers to be the way of salvation and are preached from numerous pulpits, as also are other confusing ideas. Here, for example, is a man who preaches discipleship for salvation saying, to be saved you must give up everything you have, hate your wife, children, everybody, compared with Jesus, serve him in total devotion, bearing your cross, being always faithful, and hope you will be good enough to merit your way into heaven. Fortunately, many others say “No,” discipleship is not how to be saved. But another says, wait a minute, you’ve got to be baptized to wash away your sins and this has to be done the right way and by somebody in our church. Others say, Come to our church, confess your sins to us because we can forgive them and do things for you after you are dead. Another says come to us and receive the Holy Ghost, talk in tongues; we can lay hands on

you, heal you from diseases and keep you on the right track. Another says, Come to us; we will wash your feet like Jesus said so you can have part with him. And still another says, don't forget about keeping the Law; you've got to come to church on Saturday, eat what Moses said, and make sure you don't take the mark of the beast.

Confusion abounds! Indeed, it is evident that in many places the Gospel of the Grace of God is poorly understood, or not understood at all, and is contradicted. Thus, if an individual understands the Gospel of God's Grace and is so fortunate as to be part of a fellowship of Christians wherein this message is held forth in clarity, that Christian has much for which to be thankful. Gospel clarity is vital to our assurance and to a proper understanding of motivations for obedience to God in daily life.

In the confusion that is prevalent, discipleship is a huge factor. This Bible topic must be approached with the Gospel of the Grace of God in mind and with care taken not to dispute it. Our basic message of salvation by grace through faith is crucial. One thing that greatly helps in understanding discipleship is realizing there are several kinds or levels of it, which this booklet endeavors to point out. Important issues come into view as these are considered. The bottom line is that in this matter, as in all topics, we must never come up with "another gospel" as in Galatians 1:9, but be cautious, as was Paul, for the "*truth of the gospel to continue*" (Gal. 2:5). "*I do not frustrate the Grace of God for if righteousness come by the Law, then Christ is dead in vain*" (Gal. 2:21). "*Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free*" (Gal. 5:1). To Timothy, he exhorted, "*Be strong in the Grace that is in Christ Jesus*" (II Tim. 2:1). May we take it to heart and always be true to the Gospel of the Grace of God.

- Art Sims

Three Kinds of Discipleship

Joseph of Arimethia was *a disciple but secretly for fear of the Jews* (John 19:38). Another disciple was Judas but a non-believing disciple, as Jesus said, "*Have not I chosen you twelve and one of you is a devil*" (John 6:70)? Peter was a disciple who *denied* the Lord (John 18:25). Matthew says, "*they all forsook him and fled*" (Matt. 26:56). But all these were disciples. To be a disciple is to follow someone as a pupil, a learner. The Greek word is *mathetes*, student, learner, pupil.

A Fourth Kind – Perfect Discipleship

The Kind that No Follower of Jesus Can Do

But in following Jesus there is a level of discipleship that no one can achieve. Jesus used strong figurative expressions to convey that no one can follow him as a perfect disciple. To do so you have to be perfect, like him, in all behavior and thought, sinless, fulfilling every standard he displayed and set forth, totally faithful and obedient to God the Father in every respect, never distracted by anyone or anything, never faltering for even a moment, but perfect, just like Jesus. We see this in Luke 6:40.

"The DISCIPLE is not above his master: but every one who is PERFECT shall be AS HIS MASTER."

This is indeed the "perfect" disciple, perfectly trained so that now he is "AS HIS MASTER," equal to him. No one can follow Jesus and achieve this. Only he is sinless, totally faithful in every respect, never faltering. In following someone else, yes, the disciple can become equal to the master. Some guitar students, for example, become equal to their

teachers in playing skill. But no follower of Jesus is ever equal to him. This impossibility is emphasized by him with great demands to show it's too much. Hate your wife, children, parents, forsake everything you have. Where is the person who meets this level of discipleship? Here he says it:

If you will BE PERFECT, go and sell what you have, give to the poor, you shall have treasure in heaven: and come AND FOLLOW ME. - Matthew 19:21

If any man come to me and HATE NOT his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” – Luke 14:26

Whosoever he is of you who FORSAKES NOT ALL THAT HE HAS, cannot be my disciple. – Luke 14:33
 (“my”—mou, genitive case—a disciple of me)

Who doesn't see that the extremes in these texts are beyond our compliance? “*If you will be perfect*,” said Jesus. Do we not realize hating your wife is an intentional overstatement, depicting devotion beyond expectation? In fact, we must **NOT** do this for we are plainly taught the opposite. “*Husbands love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church and gave himself for it*” (Eph. 5:25).

Shall a man pluck out his eye or cut off his hand because Jesus said such things. It's called hyperbole. You don't do it.

Standards We Cannot Meet

Surely we are aware that in the Bible we find demands and sayings beyond what we can expect to do, crafted of course, to show us we must cast ourselves onto the mercy of God. “*Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven*

is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). “*And it shall be our righteousness IF we observe ALL these commandments before the Lord our God as He has commanded us*” (Deut. 6:25). If your eye offends you pluck it out (Mt.18:9). And though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains and have not love, I am nothing (1 Cor 13:2). Yes, and though I can leap tall buildings in a single bound and fly faster than a speeding bullet, and have not love, I am nothing. “*Good Master, What good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life* (Matt. 19:16)? “*Keep the commandments.*” But: “*All these things have I kept from my youth up.*” What a wrong response! Right response: “*But I can't do that.*” The rich young ruler went away sad, unwilling to face his inability.

Indeed, the Law demanded more than anyone could do, it's primary purpose being to show man's need for God's mercy. “*Whosoever shall keep the whole Law and yet offend in one point he is guilty of all*” (James 2:10). “*For by the Law is the knowledge of sin*” (Rom. 3:20). This was the problem with many in Israel—failure to learn the most basic lesson—no one could fully comply with the Law.

“But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumblingstone.” – Romans 9:31,32

They stumbled, supposing they could actually do it. The standard is too high. “All” is a very big word (note it carefully in Deut. 6:25). Only Jesus could do it all. Peter said to leaders wanting to put Gentiles under the Law, “*Why tempt ye God to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we were able to bear*” (Acts 15:10).

And, just as the Law was more than humans could do, so also is following Jesus in perfect discipleship. We must therefore look to God for mercy because we simply cannot measure up to being perfect, like Jesus, in all behavior and thought.

Knowing this, I am mystified when I hear preachers promoting perfect discipleship as how to be saved. How can they do it? They have their houses and cars and salaries, and they certainly don't forsake all that they have, and yet they preach that their hearers must forsake all that they have in order to be saved. How, in good conscience, can they do it?

Thank God, Jesus didn't say you have to be a disciple in order to be saved. But unfortunately, some preachers do say that, severely misunderstanding the purpose of these texts.

Disciples Today Like Joseph of Arimethia

Here is this man, Joseph of Arimethia, who the apostle John said was a disciple, but it's clear that he didn't meet the demands that Jesus spelled out. He was a *secret disciple*. Do secret disciples actually exist? This man came to Pilate, asking for the body of Jesus, obviously wanting to prepare it for burial in a respectful way. Nicodemus helped him and together they placed the body of Jesus in the tomb. The apostle John states plainly that Joseph was "*a disciple of Jesus but secretly for fear of the Jews*" (John 19:38). He certainly wasn't a man who hated "*yea his own life also*" like Jesus had said (Luke 14:26), but instead, was very much concerned for himself in fear of the Jews. He followed Jesus, but only in his heart, learning what he could without exposing himself as a disciple. This man had no testimony

for the Lord but was a disciple, a follower, but secretly in his heart. No doubt, there are many people like that today.

What About Disciples Today Like Judas?

We know of Judas as one of the twelve disciples, a follower but not a believer. Jesus said, *Have not I chosen you twelve and one of you is a devil?* The problem with Judas was that he skipped over the need for Jesus as his Savior and just became a follower. He called Jesus "Lord" as did all the others. When Jesus said, "*one of you will betray me*," they "*began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I* (Matt. 26:22)? That included Judas. He, like the others, called Jesus "Lord," but unlike them he did not believe upon Jesus for his gift of salvation. Many others, down through the centuries, have done the same thing. They have looked upon Jesus as a good example to follow, but haven't seen themselves as unworthy sinners, needing to trust in him for his merciful gift of salvation. Sadly, according to Jesus, there will be many like that in the day of judgment. He explained:

"Not every one who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name? and in your name have cast out devils? and in your name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity." – Matt. 7:21-23

These people are like Judas who skipped the most important matter in the Father's will, which Jesus specifically declared: "*And this is the will of Him who sent me, that every one who sees the Son, and believes on him, may have*

everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:40). People back then saw Jesus with physical eyes, whereas now he is seen with eyes of understanding. The Father's will is the same—believe on the Son and the Son will raise them up at the last day.

We must note that Jesus's words to these people won't be, *I once knew you but don't know you anymore*. Instead, he will say, *I never knew you*. They will point to *many wonderful works they have done in his name*. How sad! They thought they could work their way into salvation but Jesus calls it iniquity. *I NEVER KNEW YOU; depart from me, YOU WHO WORK INIQUITY*. Followers, yes, disciples, yes; like Judas, who called Jesus "Lord" but who never believed upon him for his gift of everlasting life.

Disciples Today Like Peter

Actually, Matthew tells us, not only did Peter deny the Lord, but says of all the disciples, "*they all forsook him and fled*" (Matt. 26:56). What shall we think of all these disciples? Did they lose their salvation and afterward get saved again? Or did they lose their confidence, joy and peace, and then afterward become restored in their walk with the Lord?

We know they didn't lose their salvation and get saved again because Hebrews chapter 6 tells us that cannot happen. This chapter in the Book of Hebrews informs us, in verse 6, that no one can be saved a second time, saying,

"it is impossible to renew them again to repentance."

We must understand, receiving salvation is a one-time matter; it cannot be repeated. So then, what can a believer do

who "*falls away*," back-slides? He cannot go back and get saved again—doesn't need to—he is still saved. It doesn't say "*fall away from being saved*" but Christians do backslide. What he must do is correct his back-sliding, take up from where he is, and go on with the Lord. Anyone who thinks such a person can be saved a second time is very wrong and this verse goes on to say why:

"seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame." Hebrews 6:6

Think about it. Jesus' death is enough to save any man one time, but not enough to save any man twice. In order to save someone a second time Jesus would have to die for that person a second time. Accordingly, a preacher who says such a thing is "*crucifying to himself the Son of God afresh*."

And not only that, but by preaching that salvation can be lost, the preacher is "*putting Jesus to an open shame*." What a lousy Savior! He cannot do what he promised. Having said a believer "*shall not come into condemnation*" (John 5:24), it turns out that Jesus was wrong; it does happen. What a lousy Savior, unable to fulfill what he promised and set out to do!

The problem with preachers who think that way is that they don't realize who does the saving. They think they save themselves by being faithful in good behavior and good works, doing their part. They know they can fail, so naturally, they think a believer can lose his salvation. But it's not that way. Paul states the issue in Romans 11:6.

And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.

This means we cannot have it both ways. Either what we receive is 100 percent by grace and not by works at all, the whole thing depending upon Jesus; or it's 100 percent by works and not by grace at all, the whole thing depending upon us. These principles simply cannot be mixed. We can receive something by grace and receive other things by works, of course, but nothing can be received by mixing these realities.

Let Us Not Contradict the Gospel of God's Grace

This then is the most troubling matter in the preaching of discipleship as how to be saved. That message blatantly contradicts the Gospel of the Grace of God. We do know, of course, it is proper and expected for believers to be faithful in good behavior, have good deeds in their lives, and serve Jesus with devotion and love. But I don't know how framing these virtues and actions as how to be saved can be anything other than salvation by works, seriously contradicting our basic message of salvation as the free, totally undeserved gift of God. Romans 3:24 declares this good news from God, saying we are:

"justified FREELY by His grace."

Let us appreciate this important word, "freely," used here in describing God's grace. It's the Greek, *dorean*, free gift, something given without cause in the receiver, opposite to getting something by deserving it, working for it, earning it. Indeed, if people are saved by forsaking all they have, devotedly following Jesus, faithfully serving him, these are all meritorious virtues and actions. In that case, it's salvation by works pure and simple, and is not the Grace of God defined and emphasized by the apostle Paul. How plain he makes it!

"Now to him who works is the reward NOT RECKONED OF GRACE, but of debt. But to him who works not, but believes on him Who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."

TWO VITAL FACTS TO APPRECIATE IN THIS TEXT FROM ROMANS CHAPTER FOUR:

1. First, if we work for something it isn't grace—it's not a gift, not free, but is owed to us as a debt for the work we have done. That's the opposite of grace because grace is receiving something for free, without deserving it.
2. Second, believing is not a work. The verse says, "*to him who works NOT but believes...*" Obviously then, God does not consider believing to be a work, and we must not either. There is nothing to boast about in believing someone to do something we cannot do for ourselves. Instead, the merit is all in the one who is kind to us. Therefore we cannot boast about having faith. This makes faith fully compatible with grace, as Paul answers: *Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith (Romans 3:27).*

WHY GOD EXCLUDES HUMAN MERIT

For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, LEST ANY MAN SHOULD BOAST. – Eph. 2:8,9

This is the reason—lest and man should boast. That is, God doesn't allow people to earn salvation by working for it because if He did they could boast about it. So it is not of works, *lest any man should boast*. Can we imagine someone in heaven saying, "God sure is lucky to have me; if anybody

deserves to be here in heaven it's me; just look at all the good things I did back there on earth." That's silly, isn't it. Nobody in heaven will talk like that. Instead, we can expect to hear, "I don't deserve to be here at all but I'm so glad God saved me by His grace." God doesn't share the credit. He does the saving, not us. This is why salvation is by grace with no merit on our part at all, *lest any man should boast.*

HOW GOOD WOULD I HAVE TO BE?

The standard is quite clear. It isn't being good, but perfect. *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.* God is perfect, heaven is going to be a perfect place and we must be perfect to live with Him there—not good, but perfect. The only way we can be perfect is to have the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ counted to us by God the Father, which Paul states in Philippians 3:9.

"And be found in him, NOT HAVING MY OWN RIGHTEOUSNESS, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith."

Obviously, this isn't just being good, trying to do my part to get myself to heaven. In that case, I would have to be as good as God, perfect! But as Romans 3:23 points out, we all come short of the glory of God. Therefore, I must not think I can depend upon my own ability to live righteously, hoping this can somehow measure up and get me to heaven. Instead, each individual must rest his or her heart in the free gift of righteousness from God which is received by faith. That's grace, and being by grace, salvation is indeed the free gift of God, received through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

RIGHT REASONS FOR RIGHT LIVING

We do want to live right, of course, and we want people we know to live upright, obedient lives to God. But the worst reason anyone can have for living an upright life is the false notion that we can work our way into heaven. Many reasons are given that are right and good, which don't contradict the Grace of God but motivate us in harmony with it. We should note that in Paul's day many Christians were living terrible lives, failing to please God. We see this especially in the Corinthian letters. But Paul did not deal with these people by telling them they couldn't possibly be saved, or that they were losing their salvation or now had to earn their salvation. No, he affirmed the great doctrines of grace and also brought to bear true reasons for believers to behave themselves and live obedient lives unto God. These doctrines make clear that there is no role for works in receiving God's free gift of eternal salvation because God Himself does all the work; we are His workmanship. He creates us in Christ Jesus, generating new life inside of us, and then, with this new life created, we are expected to walk in good works.

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." — Ephesians 2:10

Thus, after we are saved, many good reasons are indeed given for us to behave ourselves and have these good works. Some of these reasons to be appreciated are these:

1. **Gratitude, the powerful motivation of grace for right living before God.** Surely if we have a grasp of the great price our Lord paid to save us, how can we help but be a little bit grateful, and if we are just the least bit grateful,

how can we help but realize we should want to please God? And thus we find in Titus 2:11-14, it is *the grace of God that teaches us to live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world.*

2. The Spirit of God is permanently with us. We are instructed, “*Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God whereby you are sealed to the day of redemption*” (Eph. 4:30). We cannot grieve Him away because He is our seal to the day of redemption. He is even the earnest of our inheritance (Eph. 1:14). So He is always with us, seeing everything we do, hearing everything we say. We cannot hide from Him and do bad things. He is right there with us all the time, when we do well and when we do bad. Maybe we would like it if we could hide from Him and do bad, but we cannot. He abides permanently with us.

3. Avoid the chastening of the Lord. God will not leave us alone to let us live as we please. He chastens us when we do wrong. “*Whom the Lord loves He chastens*” (Heb. 12:6). Like any good father our heavenly Father disciplines His children. He applies just the right amount of correction each one needs. Most of the time we experience the chastening of the Lord in our hearts, being smitten with misery when we do wrong. There have been times when some believers have been chastened severely with outward discipline (see 1 Cor 11:30,32), but mostly, the chastening of our hearts moves us to correction. It is so much better to obey the Lord and enjoy our walk with Him in daily life.

4. Daily fellowship with God depends upon a believer walking in the light of God’s truth. “*If we say that we have fellowship with Him and walk in darkness, we lie and do not*

the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:6,7). This isn’t how someone is saved, for then it would be salvation by works—how we walk. Rather, this is daily fellowship of a believer with Christ and with the Spirit who dwells within. Paul calls it the “*fellowship of the Spirit*” (Phil. 2:1). We are to “*walk in the Spirit*” (Gal.5:16), enjoying “*the fruit of the Spirit*” (Gal. 5:22) which includes love, joy and peace. When we step out of the light, disobeying the Lord, this intimate fellowship with him is interrupted and chastisement begins. So we are taught to judge ourselves, confessing our disobedience, which cleanses and restores us to our walk (1 John 1:9). Paul expressed it, saying, “*If we would judge ourselves we should not be judged (chastened), but when we are judged we are chastened of the Lord that we should not be condemned with the world*” (1 Cor. 11:31,32). It is wonderful for a believer to walk with the Lord and enjoy this close fellowship with him. Surely this teaching of daily fellowship with our Lord motivates us to be obedient to him, enjoying this fellowship with him in our daily walk.

5. Our prospect of rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Salvation is not a reward but is our gift from God whereas rewards are earned by faithful service. We are instructed about this in 1 Cor. 3:12-15, being shown that our work, our service for the Lord, is going to be evaluated. “*If any man’s work abide he shall receive a reward*” (v.14). What a great thought it is that we can look forward to the “*praise of God*” when our day of evaluation comes (1 Cor 4:5). Paul also speaks of a crown for loving the truth of our Lord’s second coming (II Tim. 4:8). Surely these are teach-

ings that make us well aware of the importance of living well pleasing to God in our daily lives.

6. We are taught to care about our influence on other people. *“None of us lives to himself”* (Romans 14:7). We do have influence upon people who know us and observe us. Let us care about our testimony before them. May we *shine as lights in the world* for our Lord (Philippians 2:15).

These then, are some good reasons, RIGHT REASONS, for behaving ourselves and living as we should. But again, there is a very bad reason, the WRONG REASON, for right living. That wrong reason is the absurd notion that by right living we can earn our way into heaven. It is wrong because we are saved, *“not of works, lest any man should boast.”* (Ephesians 2:9). Trying to work our way to heaven is not acceptable, and thus, is not a right reason for right living.

DISCIPLESHIP THAT WE CAN DO

Back to the topic of discipleship, as noted already, a “disciple” is a learner, a student, one who follows as a pupil. We’ve seen from Luke 6:40 that a *perfect* disciple is one who becomes AS HIS MASTER, equal to his teacher (Luke 6:40). This can happen when someone learns how to sing, play chess, be an artist. That disciple can become equal to the master. But this is impossible in following Jesus because he is unlike anyone else who might be followed, perfectly sinless, always totally faithful to God the Father. It is vital to realize we cannot achieve this. We can follow Jesus as a pupil, learning more and more, but no Christian can ever become equal to Jesus in daily life. It is necessary that we know this, and therefore that we must rely upon the mercy of

God rather than ourselves for our acceptance with Him. When our Lord was here on earth he emphasized the impossible demands of perfect discipleship.

None of this means we cannot be disciples, just that we cannot be *perfect* disciples. So let us be *imperfect* disciples, pupils, students, not to be saved, but to learn more and more, growing in grace and knowledge as Peter puts it (1 Peter 3:18). In all of this, may God deliver us from any notion that we might measure up and be equal to Jesus in our daily lives, sinless, perfectly faithful like him to God the Father. And always, let us be very clear, discipleship is not how to be saved. Instead, salvation is received by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. He does the saving, not us; we cannot save ourselves. We must count only upon him for our acceptance with God.