

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pastor Eric Chang

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MAKE DISCIPLES

Matthew 28:18-20

When someone important to us departs, we pay special attention to the last things he or she said. These words become very precious because we know that we will not see that person anymore. Here are the last words of Jesus to his disciples in the gospel of Matthew. Matthew 28:18-20.

Matthew 28:18. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

This passage is known as the Great Commission, a passage where Jesus tells us what is our commission in the world, which is to make disciples. Disciples of who? Of the Lord Jesus of course. And who is this Jesus? He is the resurrected Christ to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given. Notice his claim. *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me*, Jesus says.

The authority of Jesus

That is a strange statement, don't you find? Jesus is God who became flesh. Why did He feel the need to say that all authority has been given to him? It is all his anyway. How can it be that God has somebody else giving authority to him?

Jesus, of course, has complete authority over heaven and earth. He is God! But when He came into the world, He did not come as one who has complete authority over the universe. On the contrary, He humbled himself and came down as a human being. Philippians 2:7 says that *He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*

Jesus did not come for his sake. He came for our sake, in order to save us from our sins. This could not be accomplished unless He came as a human being to be our representative. And it is as our representative that all authority has been given to him. It was as man that all authority was given to him. Jesus was speaking as the redeemer-man, the man who reversed what Adam had done by his sin.

It is in that light that we must understand the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy in Daniel 7:13-14. This is what we read. *I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve*

him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. In Daniel's vision, there is a 'son of man' who was given an everlasting dominion. The Messiah is here called the 'son of man,' not Son of God. He was made in the likeness of sinful flesh, and died as a human being. And when he resurrected, it is to this son of man that all authority, kingdom, dominion are given over.

That is why Jesus said to his disciples, after his resurrection, that all authority in the universe has been handed over to him. And it is on the basis of this mediatorial authority that he now sends out his disciples on the mission to evangelize the world. This is to provide them in turn with authority and give them confidence as they go.

The authority of the disciples

The word 'therefore' is very important to notice. It makes the connection between the authority of Jesus and the fulfilling of the task assigned to the disciples and those who will come after them. 'All authority has been given to Me, therefore, go and make disciples.' 'I have been given all power, and now I'm giving you this power to make disciples.' Jesus' claim to all authority can be understood as a claim to all power, the power to act as a sovereign. The connective 'therefore' implies that Jesus' power will empower his disciples to fulfill the commission he now gives them.

In other words, a disciple is a follower of Jesus who carries the power of his Master. And because he follows Jesus and carries his power, the disciple represents the Lord Jesus wherever he goes. That is why Jesus said, 'If anyone rejects you, he has rejected Me. If anyone accepts you, he has accepted Me.' Think about those words and the authority that a (true) disciple carries.

So Jesus has given us the responsibility to make other disciples. The obvious meaning of 'making disciples' is to proclaim the message of the gospel to those who have not heard it. Luke's account of the commission gives us more insight to the meaning of those words. Let's read Luke 24:46-48.

*Luke 24:46. And He said to them, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day;
47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.
48 You are witnesses of these things.*

Just before his departure, Jesus explained to his disciples the relationship of his earthly ministry and his ascended ministry. He asked them to take the message of salvation to the world, inviting them to approach God through repentance and forgiveness of sins. When we put Matthew 28 and Luke 24 side by side, we see that 'making disciples' is accomplished through 'preaching repentance and remission of sins' in the name of Jesus.

*Matthew 28:19. Go therefore and **make disciples of all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Luke 24:47. And that **repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations**, beginning from Jerusalem.*

The disciple and his master

Now we have to look at the concept of being a disciple.

The Greek word for 'make disciples' is *matheteuo* and the noun 'disciple' is *mathetes*, which refers to a person who was a learner or an apprentice. At the time of Jesus, if you wanted to learn a

trade or any type of skills, you did not go to some school. You would go to a master who knows that particular field and who can teach it. It could be music, writing, hunting, dancing, astronomy. The apostle Paul was a tent maker. How did he learn to make tents? He acquired his skills from an expert in tent making. He would learn from his master for as long as it was necessary to become himself a tent maker.

The relationship between the master and the disciple was determined by the master, ranging from being a pupil who was there for a short period of time to learn a specific skill to a devotee who has made an important personal life commitment to the master. In fields like philosophy or religion, it was more the latter type that was observed. It was not unusual to see a religious disciple who was so committed to his master that he would try to emulate the overall lifestyle of the master. He would follow the master wherever he went. He would literally live with him. This kind of commitment assumed the development of a very close relationship between the disciple and the master, and the relationship extended to imitation of the conduct of the master. This is the notion of the word 'disciple' understood by Jesus' audience.

A key word in the NT that reflects this disciple-master relationship is the verb 'to follow'. The disciple follows the master. It is a word that occurs again and again in the NT, often in reference to following Jesus. In fact, this is the word that Jesus used to call a person to discipleship. Here are some examples:

- Jesus said to Philip, ***Follow Me*** (John 1:43).
- Jesus said to Peter, Andrew, James and John, ***Come, follow Me*** (Mark 1:17).
- Jesus said to Matthew Levi, ***Follow Me*** (Mark 2:14).
- Jesus said to a man who wanted to bury his father, ***Follow Me*** (Matthew 8:22).
- Jesus said to the rich young ruler, ***Come, follow Me*** (Matthew 19:21).

Three types of discipleship

Various groups of disciples are mentioned in the NT. Mark 2:18 is particularly interesting because we find in that one verse three different groups of disciples. These three groups were debating the question of fasting.

*Mark 2:18. The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were accustomed to fast. People came to him and objected, "Why do the **disciples of John** and the **disciples of the Pharisees** fast, but **your disciples** do not fast?"*

The disciples of John the Baptist. The disciples of the Pharisees. The disciples of Jesus. Three groups of disciples, three types of discipleship.

John the Baptist was a hermitlike prophet who preached repentance for sins as he prepared the way for Jesus and the messianic age. His message of repentance was intended for all of Israel, and people from all over Israel came to be baptized by him. John had his own disciples who assisted him in his ministry. They first appeared in the gospels at the baptism of Jesus (John 1:35-37). They were fully committed to John and they centered their lives on the practice of piety as John had. Even after John's death, many continued his ministry for years as a movement. They will be found in distant places as Alexandria (Acts 18:24-25) and Ephesus (Acts 19:1-3).

Then there are the disciples of the Pharisees. These disciples were not committed to a person, but rather to a religious institution. The Pharisees were known for their intense study of the Scriptures and of the oral tradition. They were extremely committed to righteousness. Unfortunately, their mistaken view of righteousness led them to legalism. So the disciples of the Pharisees were students of the Law and tradition, and were practitioners of legalistic adherence to both.

The disciples of John and of the Pharisees are two NT examples that illustrate how the disciple-master relation depended on the kind of master or group the disciple belonged. Specific lifestyles occurred with each follower, and each change resulted in certain expectations of how a disciple should conduct himself.

What about the disciples of Jesus? What did Jesus expect from his disciples? What does a disciple of Jesus look like?

Here in Matthew 28, we notice three things that need to be done concerning the disciple. First, he must be baptized. Secondly, he must be taught to observe everything that Jesus commanded. Thirdly, he is to abide in the fellowship of God's presence. Baptism, Jesus' teaching, God's presence.

In order to help us remember these three points, I will tie them up with John 14:6 where Jesus said, *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* The way. The truth. The life. The way is associated with baptism, the truth with all that Jesus commanded, and the life with God's presence.

'baptizing them' --- the way
'all that I have commanded' --- the truth
'I am with you' --- the life

The way

Let us start with the first pair, the way and baptism. What is a way? A way is something that you follow. If there is no way, there is nothing to follow. A way leads to a certain destination. In order to reach that destination, you have to move and follow the way. This cannot happen unless you leave some things behind. If you are not willing to leave anything, there is no point following the way. In Luke 14:33, Jesus said, *Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.* That is pretty clear. We have to leave everything. In spiritual terms, this means that we have to accept to leave the old way of life behind, the old way of life dominated by sin. And in following the path, a new way of life with Christ begins.

This is precisely what baptism means. Baptism is a break with our old way of life, a break with our sins, a break with the world, a break with our self. We leave all that behind. You see that there is something 'radical' in becoming a disciple of Jesus. We are asked to forsake everything. We have to quit completely the way we used to live. This is reflected in the fact that baptism is a symbol of death, of putting to death the old man. Jesus said in Luke 14:27, *Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple.* The crucifixion of the old man in us is a central aspect of baptism. Just as death expresses something that is final, there is something 'final' in the decision of becoming a disciple of Jesus. There is no turning back. *No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God,* the Lord Jesus said in Luke 9:62. This kind of person is not fit to be a disciple of Christ.

Often a well-intentioned Christian will ask, 'Am I supposed to quit my job? Am I still a true disciple if I am not in full time ministry for God? Do I have to sell my house? Can I still keep my hobbies?' It is true that when Jesus called the Twelve disciples, He expected them to leave everything. That included leaving their families, professions, and property. This is often misunderstood, unfortunately, as a necessary sacrifice for anyone desiring to become a disciple of Jesus. It should not be considered as a requirement for all. Leaving physically all to follow Jesus was required of the Twelve because of the special role Jesus wanted them to play, but it was not intended for all his followers. We can take the example of Joseph of Arimathea who did not follow Jesus around. He was still considered a disciple of Jesus, even though he was a 'secrete disciple' (because of his fear of the Jews' we are told in John 19:38), even though he continued to serve within the religious establishment of Israel (Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50-51).

Following Jesus in the figurative sense, however, is a requirement for all. By ‘figurative following of Jesus,’ we mean self-denial, renouncing to one’s old ways, exchanging the allegiances of this world for allegiance to Jesus alone. This is not a one-time decision. This is to be done on a day-by-day, moment-by-moment basis. *If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross **daily** and follow me* (Luke 9:23).

The truth

Let’s talk about the second pair, the truth and ‘teaching them to observe all that Jesus have commanded.’ The second point concerns the teaching of the Lord Jesus. There is something special about the words of the Lord. They stand on a different level from any other text in the Scriptures. We read in Hebrews 1:1-2 that, *God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son...* What his Son said stands out in distinction to what all the other characters of the Scriptures said. He is the only person who has authority over the OT. He said, ‘You have heard it said in the OT this statement, but I say to you...’ Jesus was the only one who could take parts of the OT in this way and raise them up to a higher spiritual standard. No one else was allowed to do anything like that.

Matthew tells us that early in Jesus’ ministry, *the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law* (Matthew 7:28-29). The teachers of the law often quoted from well-known rabbis in order to give their words more authority. Jesus did not need to quote anyone because He is himself the law giver, and as such He is the ultimate authority.

But knowing Jesus’ teaching is not enough. His disciples are called to observe all that He commanded. Changes in their lives will be manifested because they obey his teaching, all of his teaching. And as they obey his teaching, they grow to become like Jesus. In the rabbinic form of discipleship, the goal of the disciples was often to become someday rabbis themselves, and to have their own disciples who would follow them. The Christian disciple is different. His ultimate goal is to be conformed to the image of Christ and to carry out the same ministry as He did. For this to happen, obedience to his teaching is absolutely necessary.

The life

So a disciple is someone who follows the way in Jesus. It is someone who obeys the truth as it is in Jesus. And lastly, it is someone who experiences the life in Jesus. The Lord Jesus concludes his instructions with a promise: *I am with you always, to the close of the age.*

Jesus’ physical presence with his disciples was limited to the period of his earthly ministry, but his spiritual presence has no such limitation. It is an eternal one. Though unseen, He is in our midst. He says it in different words in John 17:26: *And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and **I in them.*** Jesus is in us and we in him. That statement implies a living relationship between the disciple and Jesus. And it is upon the life of Jesus that his disciples draw to fulfill the Great Commission.