



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

Qualities of Discipleship: An Adult Lenten Study

Disciples Take Risks

Introduction

The six weeks before Easter Sunday is the season of Lent, a time for Christians to meditate on their commitment to Jesus and resolve to be stronger and more faithful in discipleship.

Like us, Jesus' first followers were far from perfect. The Gospels often portray the twelve disciples as bumbling, afraid, thick headed, and weak. Jesus frequently had to correct their expectations of him and of their discipleship. They abandoned Jesus in the time of his greatest need. But these disciples drew so much courage and conviction from Jesus' example of self-emptying love that they left behind the lives they had known, and some risked their lives to become "apostles" (those who are sent out) to proclaim the gospel and form the church. As members of the body of Christ today, we can learn from what Jesus taught the first disciples.

Before going further, it is necessary to distinguish between the terms "disciple" and "apostle." A disciple (*mathetes*) was a student. To "follow" someone was to submit to the *discipline* of that person's teaching. Thus, many of the people, both men and women, who followed Jesus on "the Way" could be called disciples. The twelve disciples that Jesus appointed were a distinct group among all the people who followed Jesus. Jesus often treated "the Twelve" as insiders who received

special instruction and who were entrusted with continuing Jesus' mission to proclaim the kingdom of God as apostles.

An apostle is someone who is sent out with a particular message or mission. The Greek term *apostolos* literally means "someone sent out." The verbal form means "to commission, to send." In the early church, "apostle" became an official role that was distinctive from other important roles in the church, including disciple, teacher, prophet, etc. (1 Cor. 12:27–30; Eph. 4:11). The church recognized that the apostles had authority to interpret who Jesus was and what he said. Eleven of the twelve disciples became apostles (Acts 1:25), sent out into the world as emissaries of Christ. Paul also claimed the title apostle (Rom. 1:1; 11:13; 1 Cor. 1:1; 9:1; Gal. 1:1). Among others specifically called "apostles" were Matthias (Acts 1:26), Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Andronicus and Junia (Rom. 16:7), and James (Jesus' brother [1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 1:19]), though others such as Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), Titus (2 Cor. 8:23; Gal. 2:1), Timothy (2 Cor. 1:1; Col. 1:1), Judas (called Barsabbas), and Silas (Acts 15:22) were also considered apostles.

Over the next six weeks, we will ponder how Jesus:

- gave the disciples the **faith to take risks** as they left everything to follow him; gave the disciples **courage** through God's calming presence; taught

that **learning and devotion** are requirements of discipleship; corrected their aspirations to greatness and taught them **humility** with the image of taking up the cross;

- sent the disciples out in twos to **work together in community**; and
- demonstrated **perseverance** in the darkest hours.

Faith to Take Risks

The first risk that Jesus' disciples took was to follow him. Later, as apostles, they would take many more risks in spreading the gospel, and some of them were martyred in doing so. But the initial decision to follow Jesus was the first risk that each one took.

Jesus called a lot of people who did not take the risk of becoming his disciples. Some were discouraged by the itinerant lifestyle and the requirement that they leave their homes (Luke 9:57–62). Some were unable to give up their possessions (Matt. 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). Jesus did not condemn these people who could not say yes. In fact, it seems that Jesus understood. He told would-be disciples that they were wise to count the cost, and he felt love for a rich young man who turned away saddened because he could not give up all he had to follow Jesus.

This session examines portrayals of people who decided to risk following Jesus and explores what this risk entailed. Some took the plunge without question, while others came to a more gradual decision. No matter the nature of their initial response, they all made a life-changing and lifelong commitment.

In some of the stories of Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John (Matthew 4:18–22 and Mark 1:16–20), Jesus said, “Follow me,” and they immediately left their boats to follow him. The parallel story in Luke 5:1–11 recounts how the fishermen were convinced to follow Jesus after he demonstrated the abundance of God's love in the miraculous catch of fish. Their response was immediate upon seeing this miracle. Saul of Tarsus also made a decision to follow Christ after a miraculous vision of the risen Lord (Acts 9:3–6; 1 Cor. 15:8; Gal. 1:16). The playful account in John 1:35–51 relates more of a process than an instant decision. The disciples heard about Jesus, observed him, were curious, spent time talking to him, and then stayed with him. The disciples assumed the risk more gradually, but they took it on completely.

The Instant Risk Takers

In the Synoptic Gospels (i.e. Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the stories of Jesus calling the first disciples are stunning in their directness and simplicity. Jesus called, and the fishermen dropped everything and followed him. They left behind their livelihoods and family (the image of the father left sitting in the boat is striking) and followed him. In Luke's account, they at least got to see a miracle before deciding.

One might deem the fishermen's behavior delusional. If one of our friends or family members simply got up and walked away to follow a charismatic person who beckoned to them, we would suspect illness or brainwashing. No doubt we would try to talk sense into them or rescue them. In fact, this is what Jesus' own family attempted to do when they heard about the crowds following Jesus. They “went out to restrain him, for people were saying ‘He has gone out of his mind’” (Mark 3:21). The Gospels do not tell us how the disciples' families reacted to their risk-taking behavior, but we can conjecture from the example of Jesus' family that there must have been some concern, if not out-and-out attempts to stop them.

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Something about Jesus made these fishermen take what must have seemed to most people like a foolhardy risk. The kingdom of God overpowers some people that way. Jesus told parables about “going all in” when one finds the kingdom. In the parable of the pearl, for example, he says that the kingdom of God is like a pearl so fine that one would immediately sell everything to buy it (Matt. 13:45–46). Evidently, Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John saw the kingdom of God in Jesus, and they left everything to have it.

Many people find this story bewildering. With the exception of Christians who join a religious community that takes care of their basic needs, most Christians rely on the stability of work, home, and established communities. Though Jesus said not to worry about food and clothing and other necessities (Matt. 6:24–34), it seems foolhardy to add to the ranks of people who truly are in need. Moreover, most of us would consider it irresponsible, even criminal, to abandon our families. Christians

wonder why the disciples took this radical risk and what this story has to do with discipleship today.

Did the Disciples Leave Their Families Forever?

Evidently, the disciples went home from time to time (Jesus and the disciples visited Peter's mother-in-law), and their wives went with them on missionary journeys. Paul mentions some of the apostles, including the brothers of Jesus and Cephas (Peter), were accompanied by "believing" wives (1 Cor. 9:5).

Messianic Hopes for a Warrior King

Without attempting to undermine the profound effect Jesus as a person had on these risk-taking disciples, we can consider how the historical and cultural context in which they lived played a part in their immediate response to Jesus. Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, a region in which many Jews lived who longed to overthrow Roman rule and take back their land. In Judea, to the south, Jews remained fairly stable under imperial rule, but in far-off Galilee, the rhetoric of revolt simmered. Jesus and his disciples lived in a place that had the reputation of being a hotbed for dissidents. Josephus, a Jewish historian of that time, said that almost all the armed revolts and guerilla warfare against Rome began in this region. One of the most powerful expressions of Jewish hope for freedom was the expectation of a messiah in the line of David who would restore Israel to political autonomy and holiness under God. For many Jews, the "kingdom of God" would be an actual earthly kingdom that God's messiah would establish after overthrowing the Romans. In the midst of this sort of frustrated expectation, Jesus appeared on the Galilean lakeshore, preaching the kingdom of God (Matt. 4:13–17). He called out to four fishermen (Matt. 4:18–22). Given the radical nature of Galilean messianic hope, perhaps these fishermen's response was not an instantaneous decision but the realization of a lifelong hope. We simply do not know how much they might have heard about Jesus before he called them, or if they knew anything at all.

But revolutionary hopes could not have been the whole story. At least one of the people Jesus called to discipleship was not a Jewish radical. Rather, he was a

tax collector who benefited from the imperial system. When Jesus said to Levi, "Follow me," Levi got up, left everything, and followed him (Luke 5:27). The story does not tell us Levi's reasons, but apparently he left behind his wealth, reputation, and a stable government position to follow Jesus.

Seeing Is Believing: Convinced to Take the Risk

In Luke's version of the story of Jesus' calling the four fishermen, Jesus does not immediately call them but simply gets into Simon's boat. Simon (called Peter) must have recognized something in Jesus, because he agreed to take him out from shore so that Jesus could teach the crowds, and he further humored Jesus by letting down the nets—again—after a fruitless night of fishing, at Jesus' bidding (Luke 5:1–5).

The next thing Simon Peter knew was that the nets were filled with so many fish that another boat had to come help pull them in, and there were still so many fish that the boats began to sink (5:6–7). Simon Peter saw a miracle of God's overwhelming abundance, and he was so startled that he fell to his knees and confessed himself to be a sinner unworthy to be in Jesus' presence (5:8). Unlike the story in Matthew and Mark, Luke's version shows fearful repentance rather than zealous abandon in Simon's initial response. "Do not be afraid," Jesus tells Simon. "From now on, you will be catching people" (5:10). Simon's brother and some of Simon's fishing partners who had helped pull in the miraculous catch of fish (including James and John) promptly left their boats and nets to follow Jesus (5:11). They took the risk of being Jesus' disciples because they had witnessed something they wanted to be part of, even if they didn't fully understand it.

The story of Saul of Tarsus who became the apostle Paul is a dramatic example of risk-taking discipleship. Saul began as an ardent opponent of the church (Acts 8:3; Gal. 1:13) until he had an encounter with the risen Christ (Acts 9:3–6; cf. 1 Cor. 15:8; Gal. 1:16). Before this experience of Jesus, Saul was dragging people off to prison (Acts 8:3) and "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). Afterward, he risked everything and eventually his life to tirelessly proclaim the gospel, found churches, and become an outspoken defender of the mission to the Gentiles.

Messianic Hopes for a Righteous Holy One

A warrior king was not the only type of messiah for which Jews of Jesus' time hoped. The Dead Sea Scrolls reveal that some Jews expected *two* messiahs: one a king like David to subdue the Romans and one a high priest who would restore right worship and devotion to God in the Jerusalem temple. Even though Jesus' disciples were from Galilee and immersed in anti-Roman rhetoric, they also had a spiritual hunger and recognized Jesus as God's Holy One. While Jesus' statement "I will make you fish for people" could be construed as a slogan for gathering freedom fighters, Jesus' words were an appeal to something much more profound and revolutionary in Jewish messianic hopes. In the context of Jesus' message to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near," Jesus was not calling the disciples to fight against an earthly kingdom but to become part of the heavenly kingdom. In many ways, this was a risk more dangerous than joining the guerilla warfare against Rome, because it involved giving up one's life in a different sort of way. It also undermined Roman authority, just like fighting against Rome did.

Believing without Seeing: Messianic Reality in John

The Gospel of John's version of discipleship is almost the reverse of the Synoptics. Instead of Jesus calling to certain people to follow him, people started following Jesus around. People followed Jesus because John said, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" (1:36), or a brother said, "We have found the Messiah" (1:41). Some of the would-be disciples seemed cautious at first. Jesus asked them what they were looking for. They asked where he was staying ("abiding"), and he told them, "Come and see" (1:39). The disciples did come and see and ended up remaining with ("abiding in") Jesus. Their decision

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to follow Jesus was not instantaneous, as it seemed to be in the Synoptic Gospels' versions. Rather, their decision came after a process of listening, watching, and being known by Jesus. John recounts this process with a touch of playfulness and humor as Jesus, like the Pied Piper, gathers a collection of curious followers who are mesmerized by him.

Messianic Hopes Realized in Jesus

The Gospel of John reflects an understanding of discipleship written a generation or two later than the Synoptic Gospels. In John, there is no evidence that people were looking for a revolutionary warrior-king messiah. Instead, the emerging church was showing signs of splitting away from its Jewish roots, from fervent hope in a messiah-to-come to full acceptance that the Messiah already has come. In John, Jesus and the disciples are still Jewish but are becoming separated from other Jews who do not accept Jesus as the Messiah. At one point, Jesus addresses some "Jews who *had believed* in him" (past tense) about becoming true disciples, but he finds that they now consider him a blasphemer (8:31–59). Jesus also encounters Jews who are on the fence; they are afraid to confess Jesus as the messiah, because they will be expelled from the synagogue (9:22).

In this troubled time, which reflects the situation of the church some years after Jesus' time, discipleship required people to break away from their families and communities even if they had never seen Jesus face-to-face. They had to believe in him through the testimony of others. Embedded in John's crucifixion narrative is a parenthetical aside addressed to the reader: "He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe" (John 19:35; see also 21:24). Thus, when the disciples first encounter Jesus in this Gospel, they follow him, but they also "come and see" if the testimony they have heard is true (1:35–50).

The Gospel of John no longer waits for a messiah. The Gospel of John has found the Messiah. By the end of the Gospel, the path to discipleship no longer results from "seeing" but from "believing." Jesus tells a doubting disciple: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (20:29).

Conclusion

Jesus' call to discipleship poses a challenge and a risk. Jesus calls, and some people take the risk (as in Matthew and Mark). Others experience Jesus' teaching and power and then take the risk (Luke). Then there are those who start to follow Jesus out of curiosity, because they have heard about him, and then they risk making their commitment permanent (John).

In whatever fashion a Christian becomes a disciple of Jesus, the end result is the same: there is no turning

back. We can be bowled over in an instant or take our time counting the cost, but when the decision is made, a disciple must accept the consequences of that risk, which is to continue Jesus' mission in the world.

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