



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 6

Qualities of Discipleship: An Adult Lenten Study

Disciples Persevere

Introduction

“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

Jesus’ disciples had to learn to persevere. Initially, they were not good at following through to the end. Even though the disciples pledged their loyalty and said they could “drink the cup” with Jesus, all four Gospels tell how Jesus’ closest followers abandoned him and fled for their lives when he was arrested. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. Only a few of the women and the “beloved disciple” were with Jesus at the cross.

Some scholars have suggested that the true miracle of Jesus’ resurrection was the way it galvanized these frightened, unsure disciples into a group of people with such faith that they were able to found new Christian communities and ensure that the church thrived in the face of internal conflicts and external opposition. Though the disciples once abandoned Jesus to save their own skins, they came to realize that they must take seriously Jesus’ teaching: they had to lose their life to save it. They were able to follow Jesus’ example of self-sacrificing love and devoted the rest of their lives to ministry for Christ’s sake. Some of them, like Peter, James, and Paul, were martyred for their efforts.

Jesus knew that his disciples would fail before they succeeded. He said to Peter: “Simon, Simon, listen!

Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32). Peter did strengthen other apostles after his denial of Jesus. Jesus told Simon Peter that he prays for his disciples and that disciples can strengthen each other, especially after they have failed.

This session will examine some of the ways Jesus prepared his disciples for a life of ministry and proclaiming the kingdom of God. To help them persevere, Jesus gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit that still empowers Christians today.

Sent Out as Sheep among Wolves

Proclaiming the gospel and healing in Jesus’ name were not safe activities in the first and second centuries. Jesus often met with resistance, and when he sent seventy disciples out to preach and heal, he told them, “See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves” (Luke 10:3). Jesus knew that some people would welcome them, but others would reject them, sometimes with open hostility (10:8–11). “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next,” Jesus advises them (Matt. 10:23). The disciples had to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (10:16). That is, they had to maintain the integrity of the gospel but be aware that there would be opposition and perhaps threats on their lives.

Jesus made no secret of the fact that following him meant taking up the cross. Matthew and Luke foreshadow Jesus' own experience of being arrested, beaten, and dragged before the authorities, both Jewish and Roman, when Jesus tells the disciples to beware of the people who will flog them and hand them over to councils, governors, and kings because of their testimony about him (Matt. 10:17–20; Luke 21:12). This danger was not merely hypothetical. Early church tradition says that James was beheaded (Acts 12:1–3) and that Peter, Bartholomew, Thomas, Simon, and Thaddaeus (also known as Jude) met violent ends as they proclaimed the gospel. It is likely that Paul was beheaded in Rome and that followers of Jesus were persecuted by the Roman Empire after the great fire in Rome in 64 CE and again during the reign of Domitian in the 80s and 90s CE. The faith and courage necessary to continue Jesus' mission under such circumstances was formidable. They met resistance from both Jews who were hostile toward those Jews who proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah and from Romans who saw the followers of Jesus as troublemakers and insurrectionists. First we will discuss the Jewish situation and then the Roman one.

Jews and Jewish Christians

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,” Jesus said (Matt. 5:10). Jesus' followers met opposition from fellow Jews who did not believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that the “righteousness” he taught was not in a valid interpretation of *torah* (instruction or law). The Gospels indicate that Jesus frequently sparred with Jewish leaders over interpretation of the *torah*. While this sort of debate was not unusual—arguing over interpretation of the law was (and still is) a respected part of Jewish tradition—it seems that Jesus spoke with such authority that he offended many of his colleagues. The proper role in such debates was to quote teachers from the past in support of one's argument and not to take credit for one's insights. But Jesus just came out and said things on his own authority. Worse, he attributed this authority directly to God. It is no wonder that many people were offended by Jesus (Matt. 13:57; 15:12; Luke 4:14–30). Some of these adversarial responses could represent the Gospel writers projecting back into Jesus' lifetime the sort of opposition they were meeting after Jesus' death

and resurrection, when the fledgling church was trying to make inroads among fellow Jews. The reasons for Jewish hostility were not simply theological. The Jews of Jesus' time had many different opinions about how to be faithful to God. Even so, it is quite likely that followers of Jesus were considered “blasphemers” for the way they talked about Jesus' relationship with God (John 10:31–39). There were also political reasons. In this turbulent time, some Jews actively resisted the Roman Empire, but many others thought the best plan was to lay low and stay out of the Romans' way. The peacefully oriented Jews adapted and assimilated, at least to the extent that they would be allowed to keep their privilege of being able to conduct their own religious practices without Roman interference. Unlike the Seleucid king Antiochus IV, who several generations before had prohibited the Jews from keeping their covenantal rituals, the Romans were more tolerant and allowed the Jews to maintain their distinctive religious practices, as long as things remained peaceful. But the Jewish followers of Jesus threatened that balance and uneasy peace when they proclaimed Jesus “king of the Jews,” which the Romans perceived as a direct threat to Roman rule.

Jews Expelled from Rome

In 49 CE, the Roman emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome. The historian Suetonius wrote, “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome” (*Claudius* 25). Scholars are not sure if “Chrestus” is a garbled reference to Christ (*Christos* in Greek), but it seems likely, because Luke also mentions this event and names Aquila and Priscilla as two of the Jewish Christians who fled from Rome to Corinth (Acts 18:2).

Some Christians today wonder why more Jews of Jesus' time did not accept Jesus as the Messiah if they heard him preach, saw him heal, and witnessed how crowds of people followed him. These signs would seem to be proof that Jesus was the Messiah. However, according to the Jewish historian Josephus and other first-century sources, Jesus was not unique in these activities. There were many healers, exorcists, and charismatic leaders in Jesus' time. Also, many Jews

had become skeptical of messianic claims. Messiahs had come and gone (Theudus and “Judas the Galilean” among them, Acts 5:36). These would-be messiahs tended to bring trouble. When someone claimed to be the messiah and rallied others to him, the ensuing unrest often caught the attention of Rome, and Rome was known for putting down unruliness with swift violence. When a culture is already on the margins, as the Jews were in the Roman Empire, that marginal culture tends to be less tolerant of people who challenge the boundaries. Jews who claimed to be the messiah threatened the fragile existence of Jewish life in the Roman Empire. For many Jews, Jesus and his followers were just such a threat.

After Jesus’ death, Jesus and his disciples were even more suspect, because Jesus had been executed by Rome on grounds of insurrection. It is likely that at least some of the Gospels and the book of Acts were written down after the Romans had besieged and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 70 CE. Jewish rebellions had resulted in the Romans’ destruction of their most holy place, so that many Jews did not want to have anything to do with other Jews who might create more problems for their people. There is evidence that Jewish followers of Jesus were being cast out of their synagogues and harshly punished for testifying about Jesus (Matt. 10:17; Luke 21:12; see also John 9: 22). Peter, John, and other apostles were taken before the Jewish council and warned not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:1–22). When they persisted in doing so, they were arrested, imprisoned, taken before the council again, and flogged. They were released only because a Pharisee named Gamaliel reasoned that if God was on their side, there would be no stopping them (5:17–42). Rifts occurred even within families. Jesus warned: “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name” (Matt. 10:21–22). Perhaps in response to this, Jesus redefined his “family” as those who followed him and obeyed his Father’s commandments. Truly this was a painful schism within Judaism, and it eventually resulted in the separation of Judaism and Christianity. But Jews were not the only ones who persecuted the followers of Jesus.

Roman Persecutions

When a fire burned down a huge section of the city of Rome in 64 CE, the emperor Nero blamed Christians for starting it. Nero said that Christianity was a deadly superstition and that Christians were haters of the human race; therefore, they were responsible for the fire. The Roman historian Tacitus reported that Nero had many Christians crucified and their crosses lit on fire. He had other Christians mauled by wild animals.

At this point in history, the Romans evidently were able to distinguish the Christians as a group apart from the Jews. It is likely that the Romans were suspicious of them, because they were a new, upstart religion separate from the venerable antiquity of Judaism. The Romans were generally tolerant of other religions. People could worship whichever gods they wanted, as long they also made sacrifices in honor of the emperor and Roman gods. Only the Jews were excused from making these sacrifices, because of the great age and respectability of their religion. Because the Christians were becoming distinct from Judaism, they were perceived as a new religion, without the protection of Judaism’s respectability.

That Nero deemed Christian beliefs “superstitious” reveals their low standing in a world where multiple religious beliefs existed side by side. Nero called Christians “haters of the human race” because of their resistance to making sacrifices to Roman idols and to the emperor. People who did not cooperate (with the exception of the Jews) were suspected of tempting fate: the gods would become dissatisfied and rain down disaster on everyone.

The Book of Revelation

Many scholars think that the book of Revelation was written during a time of Roman persecution. The figure of Babylon is a code name for Rome. The apocalyptic visions of Christ’s defeat of the powers of darkness metaphorically describe the church’s faith that God’s truth would be victorious over Rome’s earthly powers.

Equipped to Persevere in Faith

Many Protestants find tales of persecution and martyrdom among the early Christians to be macabre. Why focus on the gory details when the cross is empty? Shouldn't we be celebrating life instead of death? But stories of persecution and martyrdom can serve an important purpose for Christians today: they show what the followers of Jesus were able to accomplish even though they had to endure all manner of hardships, horrors, and even death to proclaim the gospel. Their example challenges Christians today to keep persevering, especially since we do not face the severity of opposition that our forbearers in faith had to face.

Challenges to the church today are more insidious: secularism, consumerism, racism, apathy, and other systemic ills. The church does a great deal of good in the world, and yet in many ways, the church remains complacent. In our own way, Christians today can be just as fearful as the earliest followers of Jesus. A primary fear is that we cannot make a difference. This fear is the way in which the church abandons Jesus today. We do not run away from a mob intent on arrest and crucifixion, but we fail to stand with Jesus and do his work in the world. But if we ask, Jesus gives his disciples strength and faith.

Faith That Needs Help

The Gospel of Mark includes an instructive story of faith that needs strengthening. A man comes to Jesus to ask that he heal his son, who has an evil spirit that causes violent seizures. Jesus' disciples have been unable to heal the boy, and Jesus, in exasperation, says, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you?" (Mark 9:19). The boy's father says to Jesus, "if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us" (9:22). Jesus questions the man's hesitancy: "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." And the man cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (9:23–24). Jesus commanded the evil

Jesus gives his disciples strength and faith.

spirit to come out of the boy. This story lets Christians know that Jesus can strengthen puny faith, if we ask.

Persistence in Prayer

The Gospel of Luke urges perseverance in prayer. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, and after giving them the Lord's Prayer, Jesus told them a story about a man who kept pestering his neighbor until the man got out of bed and gave him what he needed. Jesus then told the disciples: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Luke 11:9). Later, Jesus told a parable about their "need to pray always and not to lose heart" (18:1). In the parable, a widow persisted in going to a judge to ask for justice against her opponent. The parable says that the man did not fear God or respect anyone, but he granted her request so that she would stop bothering him. Jesus exhorted his disciples to be like the widow who never stopped asking (Luke 18:2–8). The apostle Paul echoed this persistence in prayer when he wrote, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17).

The Gift of the Holy Spirit

The Gospel of John portrays Jesus' perseverance in faith. Jesus loved his disciples to the end (John 13:1). The word for "end" is *telos*, which means not only a point of termination but also "to the full extent." Jesus held nothing back. When Jesus then washed the disciples' feet as an example of how they needed to serve one another, at first Peter refused to let Jesus serve him, but then he accepted Jesus' *telos*, his complete love that reaches to the full extent, by asking to have his head and hands washed, too (13:3–9). In this intimate setting, when Jesus was imparting to his disciples his last words of love and instruction, Jesus told them he was not leaving them orphaned, that he was sending an advocate, a "paraclete" (*parakletos*), who would encourage them and enable them to continue his mission in the world (14:1–12). Jesus told them that they would be able to do greater works than Jesus himself had accomplished, because Jesus was going to the Father and would do whatever they asked in his name (14:12–14). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus told his disciples that he would be with them always (28:20). In the Acts of the Apostles,

the disciples receive the Holy Spirit to empower them to be Jesus' witnesses (1:8; 2:1–13).

Conclusion

In the United States today, not many Christians experience persecution, imprisonment, or death for their faith, and yet the task Jesus sets before the church can be difficult and arduous. Christians today experience fear, doubt, and weak faith, but Jesus has bestowed on the church the gift of the Spirit and his own prayers to

help the church persevere. The apostle Paul wrote that God's promises are always a "yes" (2 Cor. 1:18–20). God is going to bring everything to completion, and nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:19–39).

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