

AUTHENTIC DISCIPLESHIP¹

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Abstract: The prosperity gospels must be considered first in the context of authentic discipleship, which is herein defined and unfolded thematically (from both Old and New Testaments) as a life of worship; devotion and loyalty in the form of faithfulness, renunciation, mercy, and love; and self-sacrifice. So understood, such discipleship is the antithesis of personal status, worldly privilege, and/or temporal power--in other words, it is the antithesis of the kinds of status, privilege, and power falsely claimed by the prosperity gospels.

INTRODUCTION AND WORKING DESCRIPTION

Permit me to begin with the obvious: Jesus of Nazareth was different. He shattered and exceeded expectations, and he broke with the norms of orthodox Jewish behavior when and as it suited him—and when it was called for by the mission of redemption and reconciliation on which he had been sent.² As the apostle Paul encapsulated it, “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19).³ My thesis for this first lecture is the following: Jesus himself *called* his disciples specifically to follow him; and he called them not to lives of prestige, unique personal insight, or, even less, to power or worldly privilege. Instead, Jesus called them to lives of worship (to worship him, and through him, the Father); to devotion and loyalty in the form of faithfulness, renunciation, mercy, and love; and, when necessary, to self-sacrifice even to the point of death for the sake of him and his gospel. Regardless of whether the specific vocabulary is used,⁴ disciples were those people who responded faithfully to Jesus’ beckoning imperative: “Follow me.” Before discipleship is any pattern of disposition or behavior, it is Jesus’ invitation, and then the disciples’ response of faith, trust, worship, and life. While it should be obvious, the point bears repeating: Without incessant attention to this bedrock “Christ connection” itself—in other words, to the relational dimension—there is literally no discipleship.⁵

¹ Obviously, an enormous bibliography is available for any and all of these topics. When it comes to authentic New Testament discipleship, this is true historically, exegetically (e.g., the relevant commentaries, both ancient and modern), and more topically (e.g., studies in biblical theology devoted to this theme, giving rise in some instances to more systematic works). In the nature of the case, only the smallest fraction of these sources will be referenced here; and the very informal and personal criterion of their selection and citation will be roughly those titles that I have found most helpful in my own exploration of these topics. The omission of one work or another should not be considered in any way as a negative estimation of its potential contributions.

² Since Jesus was a Jew, his 12 called apostles were Jews, and most of those with whom he interacted in the gospels were Jews (at least up to the passion narratives), the above point is worth noting. Of course, one should immediately add that he routinely broke with the normal patterns of Greco-Roman behavior as well.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, translations in the text are from the English Standard Version. The occasional use of different translations comes in the third presentation, where we look at a few of the specific texts most often used in support of the prosperity gospels.

⁴ As we will acknowledge below, the specific vocabulary of “discipleship” is that of the four gospels and Acts. Paul himself does not use the vocable in question.

⁵ In other words, the point cannot merely be “presupposed.” For specific, helpful treatments of this point in connection with especially John’s gospel and Paul’s letter to the Colossians, see the essays by Melvyn R. Hillmer (“They Believed in Him: Discipleship in the Johannine Tradition”) and Michael P. Knowles, (“‘Christ in You, the Hope of Glory’: Discipleship in Colossians”), both in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 84-89 and 181-184 respectively. This excellent volume goes into detail with respect to each of the canonical New Testament authors and at least their most important individual books.

A BRIEF ENCAPSULATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

As the promised and long-anticipated Messiah of Israel, Jesus was the fulfillment of the history, the worship, the institutions, and the Scriptures of the old covenant. Saint Matthew's gospel, which is a rich source for material on the nature and meaning of discipleship, has as his particular burden to make this fulfillment most explicit. It follows that when Jesus and later the New Testament writers spoke about discipleship—about what it meant to live as the redeemed people of God in their worlds—they did not start from scratch. From God's rescue of Israel from Egyptian enslavement on (as recounted in Exodus 12—15), the rest of old Israel's often sad story can be read as a multi-dimensional elaboration of, and perhaps commentary on, the first three verses of Exodus 20: "And God spoke all these words, saying, I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:1-3). Let us highlight only the most obvious themes imbedded in these verses: God speaks. God takes the initiative. Israel's God who speaks is Yahweh, who is identified more fully some chapters later as "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness . . . , forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exodus 34:6-7). This Yahweh intervenes in Israel's plight, draws them out through the waters of the Red Sea, and eventually gives them the land first promised to Abraham. Lest the implications of this saving intervention not be evident, Yahweh declares in the first of the Ten Words, or Decalogue, "You will have no other gods before me." Yahweh is asserting not only that he is their first or highest god. Indeed, Yahweh must necessarily be their one and only God. In an important sense, these three verses begin the call to discipleship in the Old Testament Scriptures. Discipleship always begins with the saving action of God and then with the Word of and from God, whether in proclamation, declaration, or invitation.

The Old Testament tells us that ancient Israel's memory was no better than ours is today. Ever merciful, through his human instruments Yahweh was prepared to refresh that memory seemingly as often as the need arose. God had expectations for his old covenant disciples. Their lives were to be substantively different from the milieu of their surrounding culture. With the people still encamped at Mount Sinai, Yahweh spoke through Moses:

Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 18:2-5)

The Decalogue that God spoke to Israel at Sinai he repeated 40 years later, on the eve of their entry into the land of promise, with this introduction: "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the rules that I speak in your hearing today, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them" (Deuteronomy 5:1). Foreseeing the time when Israel would be ruled by an earthly king, Moses said, "[A copy of this law] shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them" (Deuteronomy 17:19).

This expectation and ideal would be the rare exception rather than the norm in the centuries to follow. Conscientious discipleship all too often gave way to apostasy. Nevertheless, the prophets and the authors of the Psalms and wisdom literature continued to rehearse for wayward Israel the works and words of God. For our present purposes this may be most evident in Psalm 119, whose author was one immersed in and devoted to Yahweh's revelation: "In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word" (119:14-16). Near the end of this same lengthy psalm, he says, "I hope for your salvation, O LORD, and I do keep your commandments. . . . I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight" (119:166, 174).

SELECTED TEXTS AND PRIORITIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT GOSPELS

If we assume with many scholars an original post-exilic setting for Psalm 119, it was still centuries before Mary, the mother of Jesus, would exclaim, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 2:47), and an aged Zechariah would offer his own beatitude: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David . . ." (Luke 2:68-69). The redemption and salvation of which both Mary and Zechariah spoke would fulfill Yahweh's first promise to Abraham, namely, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (see the Abraham references in Luke 1:54-55, addressed to Mary; and in Luke 1:72-75, addressed to Zechariah). Zechariah expresses the core of the new covenant gospel when he affirms that his son, John, would "go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people, in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God" (Luke 1:76b-78a).

The gospel of Matthew, whose genealogy and nativity accounts complement those of Luke, was placed first in our New Testament for a reason. Matthew's first verse reads: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Later in chapter 1, Matthew records the angel's instructions to Joseph, who tells Joseph not only that Mary's child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, but also that they will call this son's name "Jesus." "Jesus," of course, means "Yahweh is salvation." For those who have not studied Hebrew, the angel spells out what this means going forward: "You shall call his name Jesus, *for he will save his people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21; i.e., Jesus means "Yahweh is salvation").

One can only imagine how overwhelming this must have been for Joseph. Little did he know, as well, that the boundaries of "his people" to whom Jesus' salvation extended would quickly include not only Jerusalem and Judea, but also places like Samaria, Ethiopia, and all the way to the "end of the earth" (Acts 1:8, and the subsequent unfolding of the narrative in Acts). Yet, in the last verse of Matthew 1, we are told that Joseph possessed one of the most important gifts any Christian disciple might have, which was and is the ability to hear and listen to the word of God. Matthew tells us that Joseph indeed "called his name Jesus" (1:25). From that moment on, *God* would do the calling, first directly by Jesus himself in the narratives of the four gospels; and then, by the Holy Spirit working within the church, through the gospel proclamation that Jesus had brought to expression and fulfillment.

One is thus initiated into the nature of the saving mission and ministry of Jesus, and the various dimensions of Christian discipleship must be understood within this context. As one approaches this topic, he or she is confronted by a number of additional important factors. At one level, the entire New Testament was written by, to, and for disciples; and one obviously cannot deal with everything. Second, not everything in the New Testament was spoken and written *to* everyone, by which I mean that materials that clearly were first spoken to the narrower circle of the 12 apostles are not necessarily to be regarded as imperatives or instructions for all followers of Jesus today—at least not necessarily in the same way, without significant interpretative caution.⁶ I have enough qualifying adverbs and clauses in that last sentence to preview how complicated these matters can sometimes become. For these reasons, I am limiting my consideration to passages that seem quite clearly to have abiding import and relevance for Jesus' disciples in all times, places, and contexts. This also means that we will be accenting passages in the gospels that are picked up in the apostolic letters as well. Most directly, this means that passages where Jesus is speaking to one or more of the 12 apostles directly and specifically (i.e., uniquely) will not be *assumed* to have been addressed to all Christ-followers more generally.⁷ (By way of anticipation,

⁶ This is a variation on the point frequently made by John Walton and others, namely, that while the entire Bible was written *for* us, it was not all written *to* us. In North American Lutheran theology, the point (or one much like it) was a consistent refrain of Robert Bertram, drawing initially from the 16th-century debates between Luther and Carlstadt.

⁷ Admittedly, this is sometimes a "judgment call," and not everyone who assesses these texts will always come to the same conclusion regarding every passage. In any case, this above point should not be taken to mean that passages spoken to the original 12 are irrelevant to the larger group of disciples—including 21st-century disciples. It does mean, though, that when the context indicates that something is spoken uniquely to one or more of the Twelve, this point needs to be recognized before one

something similar will apply in the third presentation when we consider passages that are often used in support of prosperity gospels. There, one of several keys will be the all-important issue of context.)

Finally, there is the matter of sheer volume. The most pertinent vocabulary for a study such as ours is very common.⁸ The basic word for “disciple” [*mathetes*] is used 261 times in the Greek New Testament.⁹ Likewise, the verb “to follow” [*akoloutho*] is used 90 times.¹⁰ Also, New Testament authors write to disciples about discipleship—in other words, about what it means to follow Jesus and what will be entailed thereby—often without using the most direct and specific vocabulary (e.g., Paul does not use *mathetes*).¹¹ Given these facts, in the next few minutes I will be weaving together and illustrating major *themes and priorities* of Christian discipleship as they are present in the New Testament materials; as they seem to be spoken to Christians generally (i.e., not first intended for a much smaller and more intimate circle); as they are typically repeated multiple times; and, as they relate to the emphases of these three presentations when they are considered together.

In New Testament theology, discipleship—by whatever vocabulary it is addressed—begins with, is sustained by, and ends with the gospel of Jesus Christ. After Saint Paul’s intense and searching autobiographical reflections in Romans 7, he transitions to what is perhaps the pinnacle of his theological expression in Romans 8 with these introductory words: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (verses 1-2). This means that discipleship is an exercise in Christian freedom for men and women¹² whose lives had previously been characterized by a hopeless cycle of law, sin, and death. This cycle was broken by nothing less than the call of a faithful God; or, in other words, by a God who always keeps his promises. Thus Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:3). Discipleship takes place as it draws its life and strength from one’s connection to Jesus, and this connection to Jesus is always and invariably a product of the action of God.

For this reason, discipleship is never about achievement, but rather childlike humility: “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). Later, in Matthew 23, Jesus spoke to the “crowds and to his disciples” (i.e., to a larger group): “But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one

immediately uses the passage for a broader purpose or application. One illustration of this situation might be some of those things spoken by Jesus to the apostles in the “upper room discourse” in John 14—17.

⁸ See Richard Longenecker’s introduction to *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, pp. 2-5 for a careful but still accessible survey.

⁹ William D. Mounce, gen. ed., *Mounce’s Complete Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 183. For a deep and extended treatment of the vocabulary, see the lengthy article by Lutheran exegete Karl Rengstorf in volume IV of the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), pp. 415-461, especially pp. 441-459. Amid all of the technical material, Rengstorf’s summary comment on p. 441 may be most relevant to our discussion: “*Mathetes* always implied the existence of a personal attachment which shapes the whole life of the one described as *mathetes*, and which in its particularity leaves no doubt as to who is deploying the formative power.”

¹⁰ Mounce, p. 260. Note well, “follow” in this context and in the forthcoming discussion means “to accompany,” rather than merely going behind. See Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), entry 15.156, on p. 202.

¹¹ Mounce, pp. 183-184.

¹² Throughout these three essays the word “disciple” pertains to *all* followers of Jesus Christ, both men and women. This is expressly indicated in Acts 9:36, where Tabitha (or Dorcas) is identified as a disciple who was “full of good works and acts of charity.” Similarly, in Acts 11:26, Barnabas and Paul met with the church at Antioch and there “taught a great many people”; and also there, we are told, the disciples—clearly a larger group—were “first called Christians.” Lest there be any residual confusion, while all of the 12 apostles were Jewish men, “disciple” is a larger, more inclusive category than “apostle.” So, all the apostles were most assuredly disciples, but not all of the disciples were apostles (see, for example, Acts 11:1, with its reference to “the apostles and the brothers [and sisters]”). On this point, see the comments in Louw and Nida, entries 36.38 and 36.41, both on p. 471.

instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (verses 7-12).

Jesus himself pulls much of this together in chapter 12 of John's gospel when, on the eve of his passion and after somewhat cryptically referring to his own impending death, he tells a wider audience: "If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him" (verse 26).¹³ Those who follow Jesus are those who serve him, and such disciples follow and serve him because they have put their faith in Jesus, in whom they recognize the presence of God (see John 2:11).

Indeed, before they do anything else, disciples put their faith in Jesus. In other words, they trust him, which means that they stake everything on him. Then they follow him, and they will not follow someone for very long if they do not trust him. Moreover, they will not follow a stranger, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers (see John 10:4-5). This language comes from the Good Shepherd pericope of Saint John's gospel. Later, in this same reading, Jesus told some skeptical Jewish leaders: "The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:25b-28).

Once again, to repeat: "I give [my sheep] eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." Reemphasizing the earlier point: This is the promise of the gospel, and it is the foundation for any and every examination of authentic discipleship. As we will hear in the third presentation, any other promise is a falsification of Jesus' gospel. Genuine discipleship lives from its connection to this word and only to this word. As Jesus himself put it, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). What is this truth, which undergirds the life of discipleship? A few verses earlier, Jesus had taken up that very question, and he used the vocabulary of discipleship in doing so: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

If the old covenant Torah can be understood properly as Israel's covenant way of life¹⁴ from and with Yahweh, the Sermon on the Mount, or Luke's counterpart in the so-called Sermon on the Plain, can profitably be considered as the new covenant way of life for disciples of Jesus, who seek to live our this relationship to their Lord in humility and trust. By heeding its instruction, such disciples are following him who is the light of the world.

Celebrated volumes and entire courses of study have been devoted to this Sermon and to all of the issues these materials raise. While important, many of those issues are not our primary focus today. Nor am I going to concern myself with interesting but often distracting questions as to whether this Sermon is gospel or law, and, if the latter, which function or use of the law it represents.¹⁵ For what it is worth, I find these kinds of questions at least potentially anachronistic. Instead, for our immediate purposes today, I will call attention to those passages that especially inform not only the nature of Christian discipleship but also the related question of how Jesus' teaching, as concentrated or epitomized in these sermons, might begin to inform a consideration of both suffering and the prosperity gospels. In essence, I regard this Sermon (as found in both Matthew and Luke), as Jesus' practical, down-to-earth unfolding of the new and extraordinary pattern of life that characterizes true human existence as it is intended to be lived, under and empowered by God's rule of grace, to which his disciples have been called in their varied stations of life.¹⁶

From the outset in Matthew and Luke, Jesus' words are an exercise in inversion. Often countering prevailing Greco-Roman norms, those who are pronounced "blessed" are the poor (Luke 6:29), or the poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3); those who mourn or weep (Matthew 5:4; Luke 6:21); those who are meek (Matthew 5:5); those who are hungry (Matthew 5:6; Luke 6:21) and thirst for righteousness

¹³ See John 12:20 for the reference to the wider audience.

¹⁴ For this simple but nonetheless rich working definition of "Torah" I am indebted to Andrew Bartelt.

¹⁵ At least as they are often addressed, these seem to be pretty uniquely "Lutheran" questions.

¹⁶ We will touch on the matter of vocation briefly in the second presentation on the theology of the cross.

(Matthew 5:6); those who are pure in heart (Matthew 5:8); the peacemakers (Matthew 5:9); and those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness (Matthew 5:10). At the end of these beatitudes, Jesus asserts that the kingdom of heaven belongs to these kinds of disciples (Matthew 5:10); or, in the more expansive rendering of Luke, “Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven” (Luke 6:23). Both Matthew and Luke include Jesus’ observation that the persecution these disciples encounter puts them in very good company, for they are following in the steps of the Old Testament prophets (Matthew 5:12; Luke 6:23).

For a moment we do well to pay attention to the evangelist Luke’s account of this portion of the Sermon, because in terms of our unifying themes in these three presentations, Luke’s version of Jesus’ beatitudes is even more explicit. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.” (Luke 6:20b-23)

Please observe, those who suffer all these things do so “on account of the Son of Man.” In other words, it is part and parcel of their discipleship, of their following Jesus in humility and trust. Luke’s presentation of the Sermon continues with three “woes,” which do not have a counterpart in Matthew: “[W]oe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets” (Luke 6:24:26).

Jesus’ blessed disciples are told not to resist one who is evil and, indeed, to eschew personal retaliation (Matthew 5:38-39). Most radical of all—and without known counterpart among other teachers in the ancient world—Jesus in both Matthew and Luke tells his disciples actually to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35);¹⁷ to bless those who curse them (Luke 6:28); and to pray for those who persecute (Matthew 5:44) or abuse them (Luke 6:28). With such behavior, one demonstrates his or her identity as a son or daughter of “your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:45). It is simply assumed that a disciple will give to the needy (Matthew 6:6; cf. Luke 6:30). Jesus does not “make a case” for it. In Matthew, the only admonition is to do such giving without seeking publicity or honor in the process (6:2-4). Luke’s account draws these themes together: “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:35-36).¹⁸

Similar instruction is provided for the disciples’ lives of prayer. Empty public verbiage should be replaced with the “Our Father” (Matthew 6:9; cf. Luke 11:2), central to which is an extolling of the Father (Matthew 6:9b). The familiar and familial direct address is followed by a prayer for the realization of God’s kingdom, and that the activities of down-to-earth human existence may reflect the prior realities and values of heaven. After a petition for “daily bread” comes a prayer to God for the forgiveness of our sins (Luke 11:4), or, in Matthew’s rendering, “our debts” (Matthew 6:12).¹⁹ This forgiveness is then properly and necessarily expressed in our own forgiveness of those who have wronged us (Matthew 6:12b; Luke 11:4b). Ever reflective of spiritual realism, the prayer concludes with a plea that disciples might be spared temptation (Matthew 6:13a; Luke 11:4) and delivered from the Evil One (Matthew 6:13b).

¹⁷ See the comments of Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine, “Jesus Through Jewish Eyes,” in *Christianity Today*, April 2012, p. 54: “[Jesus] is the only person I can find in antiquity who says you have to love your *enemy*” (emphasis Levine’s).

¹⁸ For very useful materials on the Sermon on the Mount in general and the Beatitudes in particular, see Dale C. Allison, Jr., in his sermon helps for Matthew 5:1-12, in *New Proclamation Year A, Advent Through Holy Week, 2001–2002*, ed. Marshall D. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), pp. 125-131. In very general terms, Allison’s remarks contribute to the overall reading of the Sermon on the Mount offered above. See also the older work by Martin H. Franzmann, *Follow Me: Discipleship According to Saint Matthew* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1961), especially pp. 33-64. Franzmann refers to the Sermon on the Mount as a “messianic molding of the disciple’s will” (p. 34).

¹⁹ In his exposition of the Lord’s Prayer in the Small Catechism, Martin Luther uses the German word *Schulde*, which is translated “debts.” This is also the typical German word for “guilt.”

While each of these petitions warrants—and historically has received—frequent and extended treatment in its own right, the matter of forgiveness is especially significant. God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ is a first prerequisite to any consideration of discipleship, for it is literally the lifeline from which discipleship is sustained and by which it is empowered. Knowing this reality about themselves, disciples *will*—not merely should—extend the same forgiveness to those who have sinned against them.

We do well to pause here for a moment and acknowledge that both dimensions of this Fifth Petition of the “Our Father” were of enormous importance to Martin Luther and to the entire theological tradition that followed him. He was very careful not to claim that our forgiving others ever causes or elicits God’s forgiveness.²⁰ Nevertheless, for Luther, the disciples’ prayers were always predicated on their having first heard God’s forgiveness themselves, and then, non-negotiably, their extending that same forgiveness to their neighbor. In sometimes strong language, Luther asserts that such willingness to forgive others in effect “doubles back” and assures petitioners that their own prayers for forgiveness have been heard and answered.²¹ In simplest language, this is a major point in any Lutheran understanding of discipleship.

Returning to the Sermon itself, to anyone in Jesus’ audience who might have been attracted to a first-century version of the prosperity gospel, Jesus declared flatly, “You cannot serve God and money” (Matthew 6:24b). Later in his ministry, Jesus would underscore this point in his exchange with the rich young man: “Truly I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:23; and parallels in Mark 10:23-25 and Luke 18:23-25; see also Luke 12:15, 21).²² Just as their heavenly Father feeds the birds of the air and cares for the lilies and grass of the field, human anxiety should give way to faith in the same Father who knows precisely what we need. Jesus’ counsel here is direct: “[S]eek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” Note too in this immediate context, “these things” refer to what one eats, drinks, and wears—and not to anything and everything that might be on one’s personal “wish list” (see, in context, Matthew 6:25-34). Similarly, Matthew’s account includes Jesus’ expansive promise: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8). Once again, read in context, Jesus is speaking of bread and fish—in other words, of daily necessities—and good gifts to one’s children. Jesus concludes with his all-important rhetorical statement, “how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:11b).

Before returning to the broader thematic consideration of discipleship in the New Testament, I should add that one need not blend Matthew’s and Luke’s versions of this Sermon into a single homogenized account, nor should one play them off against each other. Here, as elsewhere, Matthew and Luke are offering the work and words of Jesus at least initially to different audiences in different circumstances, and their gospel messages will be nuanced accordingly. If one does read them together—in other words, listening to their distinct yet still complementary voices—Luke sometimes offers a more intense version of what is already a stark and direct presentation in Matthew. Also, in both cases, their gospel message, extending to its eschatological consummation, is crystal clear: “Blessed are,” and “Your reward is great in heaven.”²³ From such gospel promises arise the vitality of discipleship.

SELECTED TEXTS AND PRIORITIES IN THE REMAINING NEW TESTAMENT MATERIALS

²⁰ Along with his explanations of the Lord’s Prayer in both the Small and Large Catechisms, see especially his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, from 1532, in volume 21 of the American Edition of Luther’s Works, translated and edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), p. 149. This volume is cited as LW 21 below.

²¹ LW 21, p. 149-151. See also Large Catechism III, 97.

²² Apparently, while it was and is difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven, it is not impossible. Joseph of Arimathea, who was responsible for the burial of the crucified Jesus, is identified in Matthew 27:57 (see also Mark 15:43 and Luke 23:50-51) as being both a “rich man” and a “disciple of Jesus.”

²³ Along with the Allision materials referenced above, see also Jack Dean Kingsbury’s comparable sermon helps for Matthew 5:1-12, in *New Proclamation Year A, 2004–2005, Advent Through Holy Week*, ed. Harold W. Rast (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), pp. 115-117. Kingsbury’s various writings are consistently helpful on these topics.

Turning to some of the rest of the New Testament and their different modes of presentation, James, the brother of Jesus, was not a disciple or follower of Jesus during our Lord's public ministry. But he most certainly got the message—figuratively and literally—when he was confronted by Jesus after his resurrection from the dead (see 1 Corinthians 15:7). Scholars have long observed that James' letter strongly reflects the influence not only of Jesus' teaching but even extends to Jesus' actual words, not least of which are those from the Sermon on the Mount.²⁴ Despite popular caricatures based on particular readings of James 2 (especially verses 14-26), James is not short on gospel either, the gospel from which any and all discipleship springs: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures" (James 1:17-18; not coincidentally, see Galatians 2:5, which explicitly connects "truth" and "gospel"). Well known for his simple statement, "mercy triumphs over judgment" (2:13), James concludes his extraordinarily practical letter with this counsel: "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wanderings will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (5:19-20).

James' didactic materials likewise echo those of Jesus. Among the many passages one could cite, disciples are to be "doers of the word, and not hearers only," for the one who embraces and perseveres in what James calls "the perfect law, the law of liberty" will finally "be blessed in his doing" (James 1:25). Similarly, James says, "if you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well" (2:8). Sometimes considered as an informal instance of "wisdom literature" in the New Testament, James earns this reputation with selections like this one: "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. . . . [T]he wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (3:13, 17-18).

James has very strong words for those who mistreat the poor, and he echoes Luke's version of Jesus' Sermon when he observes that God has chosen "those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom" (2:5). Rehearsing the common appeals for justice that one finds throughout the Old Testament prophets, James boils down to its essence what Christian behavior looks like: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:27).

James uses "world" here as a summary of human existence as it is lived outside of, and without dependence on or reference to, the life and rule of God. The verse just quoted from James sounds much like the typical rendering of a more familiar verse in chapter 12 of Paul's letter to the Romans: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). The Greek word that is so customarily translated as "world" in Romans 12 is actually *aión*, or "age," which gives a new sense to the passage. Specifically, "do not be conformed to this age" introduces an eschatological element in Paul's consideration of a faithful Christian life.²⁵ The arrival of the reign of God in the person and work of Jesus means that everything—our thinking, our relationships, our personal and corporate

²⁴ For example, see the excellent essay by Peter H. Davids, "Controlling the Tongue and the Wallet: Discipleship in James," in Longenecker, ed., *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, p. 227. According to Davids, there are a minimum of 36 parallels with Jesus' teaching, 25 of which are found in the Sermon on the Mount. In an older work by Martin Franzmann, James' letter is described as "essentially the recalling of the words of the Lord Jesus Christ," and an application of these words to his own, still largely Jewish church. See *The Word of the Lord Grows: A First Historical Introduction to the New Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1961), p. 38.

²⁵ The use of this vocabulary and Paul's emphasis here were initially brought to my attention by Jeffrey Gibbs. To the best of my knowledge, the only modern English translation that renders *aión* with "age," as opposed to "world," is the New American Bible, which is published by the Roman Catholic Church and used primarily in Roman Catholic congregations.

behavior—has to be re-visioned from the vantage point of one's entirely new existence *in Jesus Christ*.²⁶ Thus, the values of the reign of God now come to challenge not only the seductive external trappings of the fallen world, but also its frequently ingrained assumptions, attitudes, and criteria. Now, in Christ, these are to be exchanged for an entirely new set of priorities, expectations, and opportunities that come with life in the kingdom of God.

Much in the other New Testament letters can be read as an unfolding of this brand-new way of thinking, even when the explicit language of discipleship is no longer present. In a concentrated summary, in Galatians 5 Paul identified as the "fruit of the Spirit" no less than nine new attributes to be manifested by those who would inherit the kingdom of God: "[T]he fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (5:22; see also 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, regarding love, in connection with the other virtues of discipleship). Paul follows this verse with an important identity marker: "[T]hose who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24); and then, he uses the more direct language of discipleship, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit" (5:25).

It is important to notice in these descriptions of Christian character, attitudes, and behaviors what is missing, or, what one who reads these passages in their contexts does *not* find. One does *not* find that Christian discipleship, even at its most consecrated, leads to or entails perpetual health, fame, good fortune, or any other physical or material bounty. When it comes to discipleship as such, Jesus does not say, "Here are all the great and impressive things I have in store for you when you follow me." Instead, in 21st-century idiom he says something almost along the lines of, "Are you sure you are ready to undertake this? Are you ready to follow this path with me? You need to know what you are getting yourselves into. Pay attention, because I am going to tell you what that is."

For those with even a passing familiarity with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, they are aware of his phrase "cheap grace," which he uses frequently in his classic study on the Sermon on the Mount. Roughly speaking, cheap grace is grace without discipleship.²⁷ "Cheap grace" means that "grace alone does everything," and this in turn means that "everything can remain as it was before."²⁸ If that were not bad enough, the grace to which Bonhoeffer refers here is not even God's grace. It is instead the phony grace that human beings bestow upon themselves.²⁹ In Bonhoeffer's own exposition, he unfolds what he calls "costly grace," which undergirds and informs the Sermon on the Mount. "Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus; it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. Grace is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light.'"³⁰ For our purposes this afternoon, the phrase "costly grace" describes an essential feature of Christian discipleship, namely, that there is inevitably responsibility and cost to following Jesus.

This point was not a surprise; rather, it was explicit from the very beginning, and it is present in every category of New Testament writing. Once again, James, writing at least 15 or so years after the public ministry of Jesus, urged his readers to regard these "trials of various kinds" with "joy" (1:2), for James understood their larger purpose in the refining and strengthening of one's faith: "[F]or you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (1:3-4). Some verses later, he is even more explicit:

²⁶ "Union with Christ," or life "in Christ" is pervasive in the Pauline letters. For a convenient survey of the "in Christ" language in Paul, see Michael P. Knowles, "'Christ in You, the Hope of Glory,': Discipleship in Colossians," in Longenecker, ed., *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, pp. 194-195.

²⁷ *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1959 [German edition, 1937], p. 53. Bonhoeffer unpacks all of this—and repeats the point multiple times—in in a dense 15-page first chapter (in the older English translation) of *Cost of Discipleship* (pp. 45-60).

²⁸ *Cost of Discipleship*, p. 46.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47. For what might be Bonhoeffer's strongest indictment of cheap grace, see p. 57: "We Lutherans have gathered like eagles round the carcass of cheap grace, and there we have drunk of the poison which has killed the life of following Christ. . . . Everywhere Luther's formula [i.e., grace alone] has been repeated, but its truth perverted into self-deception."

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him" (1:12).

If one looks back to the gospels, Jesus explicitly connects discipleship, and following him, with the cross. He does this in the aftermath of Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah in Matthew 16, Mark 8, and Luke 9.³¹ In each case, the audience extends beyond Peter or the immediate 12 apostles. However, the most stark connection comes in Luke 14, where Jesus casts the matter in dramatic terms to a larger aggregate of people: "Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple'" (verses 25-27).

It is not coincidental that the one to whom the references to taking up the cross were first made most directly, the apostle Peter, later on imparts something very comparable to his own audience of new, Gentile Christians in his first canonical letter. Facing imminent persecution for their devotion to and worship of Jesus instead of the cult of the Roman emperor, Peter wrote: "[I]f when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:20b-21). Enduring persecution and suffering precisely for one's confession of Jesus becomes an opportunity and occasion for implicit and perhaps explicit witness. Later, near the end of his letter—and nearing the time of his own martyrdom—Peter makes this very move, combining warning, admonition, encouragement, witness to the promissory gospel, and doxology: "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be dominion forever and ever. Amen." (1 Peter 5:8-11) Making these kinds of connections was not unique to Peter. In the same chapter in which Saint Paul introduced the eschatological dimension of discipleship (see above, regarding Romans 12 and his use of *aion*), he told his Roman Christian readers, "rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer" (12:12).

CONCLUSION

A few moments ago, we cited Jesus' words in John 8: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." A bit before that, we sketched some discipleship themes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In that Sermon, a few verses after the Beatitudes, Jesus told his disciples: "*You* are the light of the world." This was not a slip of the tongue or Matthew's faulty memory. Jesus followed his statement in Matthew with these words: "A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14b-16). The larger theological point here is that the gospel—in its proclamation of Jesus as *the* Light of the world and in the lives of discipleship that this gospel creates—brings these two texts from John and Matthew together. Discipleship is thus from Jesus Christ, lived in Jesus Christ, and enhances the mission of Jesus Christ.

Matthew knew this. His own account of the "Great Commission" in chapter 28 (verses 16-20) reflects this. Matthew expressly refers to the 11 remaining apostles as "disciples."³² There, on the mountain, Jesus tells these first core disciples to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations." They were to do so by baptizing these men and women, and their sons and daughters, into nothing less than

³¹ The first mention of the cross in Matthew 10 comes before any consideration of Jesus' passion, in connection with Jesus sending out the Twelve. Hence, this earlier mention likely reflects a more limited audience.

³² To this point, see Edgar Krentz, "Make Disciples"—Matthew on Evangelism," in *Currents in Theology and Mission*, vol. 33, no. 1 (February 2006), page 27, note 23.

"the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and then cultivating their new lives in Jesus Christ by *teaching* them. What was the content of this instruction? Jesus is equally clear: "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

But there is still more. These new disciples are not left to fend for themselves on their own. Jesus—and Matthew's gospel—concludes: "[B]ehold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." With this last verse of Matthew we have come full circle. Near the beginning of this presentation we referred to the angel's message to Joseph. Part of that message was a quote from Isaiah 7, "they shall call his name Immanuel," which means, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). As observed earlier, Mary and Joseph were to name their child Jesus, "for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). This Jesus, who he is and what he has done, is in his person and work the saving presence and promise of God.

Finally, I began this presentation with an exceedingly brief discussion of Old Testament antecedents to distinctively New Testament discipleship. I conclude by returning to what may be the most familiar and popular text in the entire Bible. After hearing John 10, Matthew 1, the Sermon on the Mount, and all of the other texts, we read selected verses from Psalm 23 in a new and fuller light. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want . . . he leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. . . . I will fear no evil, for you [Yahweh] are with me; . . . Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (verses 1, 3, 4, and 6).

With the triune God's love and mercy going before us, abiding with us, and following us, the life *en Christo*, which is Christian discipleship, is an exercise and adventure of high calling—and it is that precisely because it is always God's calling. Such a life offers both an expanse of opportunity as well as the adversity entailed by sinful human realities. The gospel that is its source brings comfort in suffering; and its abiding promises give a sure and certain hope of resurrection destiny.