

It Is Written

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Improving Discipleship

by Doy Moyer

What can I do to improve my discipleship? I trust that these are matters all can benefit from, but I need to personalize this. I'm not simply asking, "What can I tell others to do?" but "What can I do?" Getting lost in the maze of responsibilities and thinking about what others need to do is easy. Far more difficult is the hard work of being honest with self, knowing what needs to change, and having the will to do it.

There are obvious actions and attitudes that are always on the table: more prayer, more study, more love, more efforts to help others and reach out to the lost, and so on. Most of us would likely think of these on a fairly regular basis as that which needs to improve in our lives. Certainly I would encourage us all to improve in these areas. Yet what more can I do to improve my own sense of purpose in serving the Lord?

A disciple is a learner and follower. Considering improving in this means a recognition that I have not fully achieved what I need. I have not attained the goal, and I realize that this is a life-long process. After all, who can afford to think, "I've arrived. I am perfect in every way"? At that point, we'd need to be working on our humility.

Here, then, are a handful of areas in which I believe I can improve:

More Self-Denial and Cross-Bearing

I have long thought that the hardest command in Scripture is found here: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Self-denial and cross-bearing is difficult because I am too often focused on my own conveniences. Self keeps getting in the way and needs to be brought under control. Indeed self-control is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23).

Cross-bearing is not about just dealing with normal pains and problems. Jesus said to "take" it up, which means that this is a voluntary act. If one can take it up, that one can also lay it back down again. This is about a conscious decision to be a true follower of Christ. The cross, in that culture, meant shame and reproach, and followers of Christ need to take it up and suffer for Him. I need to be more aware of this if I am going to grow further in following Jesus.

More of the Mind of Christ (Phil 2)

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus..." (Phil 2:5). In context, Paul is making the point that the brethren needed to be of one mind, not doing anything selfishly or with conceit, but considering others as more important. If Jesus could empty Himself and die on the cross for others, why would we think that we can be selfish and treat others with disrespect?

Taking on the mind of Christ means that I need to pay more attention to the needs of others. As God manifested in the flesh, Christ showed far more concern for others than He did Himself. Paul calls on us to have this same mind to empty self and give thought to the needs of others first. This is in sharp contrast to a world caught in selfish ambition. Yet if I am going to improve in being a disciple, the mind of Christ needs to be front and center in all that I do.

More Spiritual Focus

"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Col 3:1-3)

We are talking here about a mindset, a way of thinking. Improving in discipleship will not simply be about doing more stuff, but rather more about changing how I think and being more aware of my spiritual focus. This is a worldview focus, one that recognizes the temporary nature of what we can see over against the eternal nature of what we cannot see. This is what helped Paul know that the sufferings of this present world were not worthy to be compared with the glory that awaits. It's an eternal perspective that I need to keep before me constantly (2 Cor 4-5:11). I can only improve

in following Jesus when I maintain a single-minded devotion, focused upon Him (Heb 12:3), and seeing the eternal goal.

It is not difficult to see that these three areas are intertwined, part of a single goal of pressing toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ (Phil 3:14). I can improve my spiritual thinking, and in so doing will improve how I act and follow Jesus. Paul put it this way:

“For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” (2 Cor 5:14-15).

GROWING IN LITTLENESS

by Dan S. Shipley

There was a time when king Saul was useful to God's purposes. At that time he was anointed king of Israel; at a time, as Samuel tells him, "When thou wast little in thine own sight" (1 Sam. 15:17). The sense of littleness that helped qualify Saul for his crown is no less essential for those who seek a better crown (2 Tim. 4:8).

In fact, nothing is more needful in the quest for godliness (acquiring a right attitude toward God). Man's view of self determines his view of God, and vice versa. When Saul was little in his own sight, God was big. When Saul came to be big in his own sight, God became smaller. That is, God and God's will became of less importance to him. Nebuchadnezzar had the same problem. After being made to live as a beast of the field and to eat grass as the oxen for a time, his sense of littleness and understanding returned. When humbled, he could see God's bigness; that "the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whosoever He will" (Dan. 4:32). Then, he blessed and praised and honored "Him that liveth forever" (v. 34) — as do all "little" men.

Only the man with a sense of littleness acknowledges his inability to direct his own steps (Jer. 10:23) and willingly submits to God's leading. Others, like king Saul, presumptuously set aside God's will when it conflicts with their own — not in all things, mind you, nor even in most. Many are willing to do much of what God says, but, as with Saul, we learn that partial obedience is not submission at all. In fact, God calls it "rebellion" (1 Sam. 15:23). Sound harsh? It shouldn't. Not when you realize that man arrays himself against God in every act of deliberate disobedience and says, in effect, "NO, I will not submit!" Perhaps this is what prompted someone to observe that the first lesson to be learned in serving God is humility. Whenever men conclude (by any process of reasoning or rationalizing) that their ways are as good as God's, they prove themselves too big to work in God's harness.

But, not only does man change his attitude toward God in losing his sense of littleness, he also changes his attitude toward men. As men acquire those things that make them "somewhat" (whether thrones, money, position, success or education), they are apt to see their peers as somewhat less. The kind of pride that kept Saul from appreciating David is still a threat to the unity of God's people — and not only in others, for all can forget their littleness at times (like the man who became proud of his humility). God's way is "doing nothing through faction or through vainglory, but in lowliness of mind each counting other better than himself; not looking each of you to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others" (Phil. 2: 3,4). When every brother looks up to all other brethren and looks down on none, we are growing in the kind of littleness that makes us strong (2 Cor. 12: 10). May God help us to cultivate this sense of littleness; the kind that truly appreciates God and brethren; the kind that confesses weakness and wrongdoing and says, "God, be thou merciful...".