

Lessons From Would-be Disciples



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 8:19–22, 19:16–26, Mark 10:17–23, Luke 4:16–30, 18:18–30, John 3:1–21.*

Memory Text: “Another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’” (*Luke 9:61, 62, RSV*).

Life comes filled with mysteries at every level. From the workings of subatomic particles, to the very nature of space and time themselves, there is so much we do not even begin to understand.

Probably, though, of all things mysterious and hard to fathom, nothing is more so than the workings of the human heart. People, in an instant, for reasons that seem so unknowable (perhaps even to themselves), make decisions that can impact their lives in a dramatic way, for good or bad, for all eternity. No wonder that Scripture, when talking about the heart, says, “Who can know it?” (*Jer. 17:9*).

This week we will look at some would-be disciples and the decision of their hearts.

The Week at a Glance: What do the Gospels say about would-be disciples? What lessons may we learn from their experiences that can inform our discipleship, strengthen our faith, and deepen our commitment?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 26.*

The Scribe

Read Matthew 8:19, 20 (see also Luke 9:57, 58). What is the point of this story? What message is here for us? What principles can we take from it?

Here is a case of someone who, not specifically called by Jesus, volunteered instead. Notice, too, just how intense his profession was. He would follow the Lord anywhere. It is easy, even for a true follower of the Lord, to make all sorts of pronouncements about being faithful (Luke 22:33); it is not so easy, however, to follow up on them (vss. 55–61).

When was the last time you made some bold promise of faithfulness to God that you later broke? What lesson did you learn from that experience?

What also is interesting about this encounter is that the person who came to Jesus with that profession was a scribe, one of the educated elite in Israel. They were men of “culture, education, and station in life.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 365. Few scribes identified with Jesus; they were too upstanding. They followed Him, not to be influenced by His teaching but to entrap Him. Yet, here was a scribe who was touched by Jesus’ teaching to the extent that he volunteered to become a disciple.

Yet, Jesus knew the heart, and His response shows that, perhaps, this scribe’s motives were not pure. He may have wanted to join himself to Jesus in hopes of gaining worldly advantage. Christ’s response, however, quickly should have disabused him of any such notions. In the end, the text does not tell us what the ultimate choice of this scribe was. From what Jesus said, it is not hard to imagine the scribe turning away.

How do we understand what was happening with this scribe and with, for instance, Christ’s words in Mark 10:30? Are we not promised some immediate advantages in following Jesus now? If so, why is it not wrong to want those advantages? Or is it?

An Unnamed Disciple

Read Matthew 8:21, 22. How do you understand what is going on here? Why would Jesus say something like this to a person who first wanted to bury his own father?

Yesterday we viewed a scribe who sought discipleship. Today we encounter another volunteer, but one who is neither named as an individual or identified with a specific group. Examining the narrative, one wonders if Jesus was not unreasonable in His expectations. The man asked to bury his father, and in the Jewish faith it was a sacred duty to ensure a decent burial for a parent. What is going on?

Contrary to popular belief, the young man's father was neither dead nor even at the point of death. It was even possible that he was at the time "enjoying good health, and the time of his death was indefinitely in the future."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 366. If this is so, why did the man answer the way he did? Was it an excuse, one that Jesus saw through? Because the dead were usually buried the same day, had his father actually died, there would not have been a problem, because he could have attended to matters and then returned to discipleship.

This man's response revealed his character. In contrast to the scribe's hastiness and impulsiveness, he was slow, lethargic, lacking in zeal for the work, indecisive, and prone to procrastination. He was in fact delaying his discipleship to the indefinite future because he did not want to make an immediate commitment. If he did not commit right then, he would perhaps never commit. The man was, apparently, saying that he could begin discipleship only when the time was convenient for him. Furthermore, Jesus wanted it known that because of the limited time He had for ministry and training disciples, discipleship required undivided attention and full commitment.

Is the Lord calling you to do something (End a relationship? Give up a habit? Be faithful in tithe? Witness to someone?) that you intend to do, but not now? What are the dangers of delaying?

The Rich Young Ruler

Read Mark 10:17–23 (see also Matt. 19:16–26, Luke 18:18–30). What lessons can we pull from the story of this would-be disciple?

Today's lesson covers a colorful character. He did not come either timidly or under cover. He made a grand entrance. Mark says he ran to Jesus and fell on his knees before Him. While Mark and Matthew do not name the man, Luke says he was a ruler and thus perhaps a member of the honored council of the Jews. Matthew says that he was young. The name, the "rich young ruler," is a composite description derived from all three accounts.

In Jesus' presence, he immediately began a discussion, seeking, it seems, to flatter Jesus, who did not fall for the flattery. Instead, Jesus went right to the heart of his question, pointing the man to the law of God.

Why would Jesus, who knew that salvation could not be attained by works of the law (Rom. 3:28, Gal. 2:16), point him toward the law?

In a certain sense, the answer to that question is found in the response of the young man. Though he kept the law, he sensed that it was not enough. Something was missing, which is why he asked, "What lack I yet?" (Matt. 19:20). In other words, though he outwardly, in his actions, seemed a faithful follower of the Lord, something more was needed. Jesus' words, and the man's response to those words, showed that his heart was not truly converted. By pointing him to the commandments, Jesus showed him that true salvation is manifested in an obedience to the law that involves death to self. The man's wealth had become an idol to him, and Jesus showed him that, despite his outward propriety, his treasure was on earth, not in heaven, and he needed a radical change of heart.

You might be keeping the commandments, at least outwardly, but where is your treasure? What reasons do you have for justifying your answer?

Nicodemus

One of the most famous accounts in the New Testament is that of Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night and asked the question, “How can these things be?” (*John 3:9*).

Read John 3:1–21. What “things” was Nicodemus asking about?

How interesting that Jesus would be talking to Nicodemus about the workings of the Holy Spirit when, in fact, it was obvious from Nicodemus’s words and actions that he himself was being convicted by the Holy Spirit. For him to come to Jesus, not to try to trap him (as so many of his contemporaries did) but to learn, shows the sincerity of his heart.

What can we learn from Christ’s words about discipleship from what He said to Nicodemus?

Jesus’ response to Nicodemus not only was tailored to his needs but, in John’s Gospel, serves to identify suitable and unsuitable characteristics for discipleship. It says that physical birth and descent from the Jewish nation are insufficient for authentic discipleship. Discipleship presupposes a rebirth that unites one with the heavenly realm and opens one up to the constant working of the Holy Spirit. That Nicodemus misunderstood all this even further revealed the inadequacy of merely being born a Jew or being born into the right family; it also provided an opportunity for further instruction on the nature of discipleship. Although Nicodemus did not make an immediate and open response to discipleship, he at times acted as a secret disciple. At least initially, he was a would-be disciple, because he did not commit then. As we know, that later changed (*John 19:39*).

You might be of right descent; that is, you might be in the right church, with the right doctrines and teaching. Why, though, is that not enough? How can we avoid the danger of thinking that membership in the right church, or even knowledge of true doctrines, is all that we need?

Herd Mentality

Salvation, we know, is personal. We are not saved in bunches; we are not corporately brought into the kingdom of heaven (*see Ezek. 14:20*). In the end, we each will have to answer for our own deeds, not for the deeds of others (*Rom. 14:12*).

Nevertheless, most of us do not live in isolation. We are in contact with other people, and we influence others, just as we are influenced by them. It is just part of human nature, even unfallen human nature (*see Gen. 3:6*), that we influence one another, either for good or for evil. How unfortunate that, unless we are careful, the influences can be negative.

Read Luke 4:16–30. What happened here? Why did the people, as a group, act as they did? What led to the downfall of these would-be disciples?

Though at first they all marveled at His words, once those words became cutting, they turned, en masse, against Him. Imagine if some would-be disciple there, instead of succumbing to anger, submitted to the rebuke humbly. Who knows what his or her influence might have been on the others? Instead, it says that they all in the synagogue became angry, so angry that they tried to kill Him. No doubt each one's anger influenced another, and then another, until the whole synagogue, who had come there to worship the Lord, in a spasm of anger sought to kill Him instead. Had any one of these people encountered Jesus' rebuke on a one-to-one basis, they might have been angry, but most likely they would have walked away. Now, though, feeling the strength of a mob, they acted in a horrible way.

How easily influenced are you by the crowd, by the prejudices and teachings of your own society and culture? What practical steps could you take that could help protect you from the dangers of this herd mentality?

Further Study: Read *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 365, 366, 456–460, 602–605, 926–934; Ellen G. White, “Nicodemus,” pp. 167–177; “Peace Be Still,” pp. 333–341; “One Thing Thou Lackest,” pp. 518–523, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“In this age of diseased piety and perverted principle, those who are converted in life and practice will reveal a healthy and influential spirituality. Those who have a knowledge of the truth as it is revealed in God’s word must now come to the front. My brethren, God requires this of you. Every jot of your influence is now to be used on the right side. All are now to learn how to stand in defense of truth that is worthy of acceptance.”—Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry*, p. 22.

“But while Nicodemus had not publicly acknowledged Christ, he had in the Sanhedrin council repeatedly thwarted the schemes of the priests to destroy Him. When at last Christ had been lifted up on the cross, Nicodemus remembered the words that He had spoken to him in the night interview on the Mount of Olives, ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up’ (John 3:14); and he saw in Jesus the world’s Redeemer.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 104.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Has there ever been a time when you got caught up in a herd mentality, when you went along with the crowd, perhaps in a fit of emotion, and did something you later regretted? If so, what have you learned from that experience that could help protect you from doing the same thing again?
- 2 Think more about the point addressed earlier this week regarding the idea that being part of the true church is not enough. What message is there for us as Seventh-day Adventists? How are we in danger of falling into that same trap, that idea that because we believe that we have truth, that is all we need? In class, talk about how we can protect ourselves from that delusion.
- 3 Review the reason that these would-be disciples used to not make a commitment (with, we know for sure, the exception of Nicodemus). What other excuses do people use? How can we as a church help those who are struggling with this momentous decision?
- 4 What’s the difference between being a “believer” and being a disciple?

Crash Course in Faith

by JOHN MAKEUSA

I was a new believer. I boarded a small passenger plane in the Congo to fly to another city. Halfway to our destination in torrential rain, the navigation system developed a problem. Then one engine stopped. The pilot descended to look for a place to land.

I prayed as the pilot struggled to bring the plane down safely. Then the other engine stopped working. Without power we had no control over the plane. I prayed earnestly, “Lord, if You have work for me to do, please save us.”

We crashed onto the savannah and flipped over, tumbling to a stop. My seatbelt broke, and I was knocked unconscious. I awoke lying outside the plane. I had neck and leg injuries and couldn’t walk. We saw no one around and had no idea where to go for help, so we slept fitfully by the plane that night.

The next morning we saw two men paddling a canoe down a nearby river and shouted at them. Because it was a time of war, the men thought we were military and took us to the guerilla army headquarters nearby. These soldiers could have killed us, for we were from “enemy” territory. But God protected us, and the soldiers fed us and bandaged our wounds.

A week later when we were able to walk, soldiers marched us to their commander, 130 miles (200 kilometers) away. When we arrived four days later, the commander questioned us. I told him I was an Adventist Christian, not a soldier. He held us for a month. During this time I shared my faith, and one soldier asked how to become a Christian. I told him all that I knew and prayed with him as he accepted Jesus as his Lord. When we were set free, we walked toward the Tanzanian border to find help.

Soldiers at the border arrested us, thinking we were soldiers. They held us for more than two months. Throughout our ordeal I shared my faith with the pilot and other passengers as well as with our captors. We prayed together, and the other men asked me to pray for them, as well.

When finally we were freed to return home, we had been gone four months. Everyone thought we were dead. What gladness when we arrived! What rejoicing when I testified how God had saved us, not once but four times, and helped me share my faith with strangers. The experience helped me know I can trust God in everything.

Evangelism takes many forms, and your mission offerings make evangelism possible.

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