

The Joy of Christian Discipleship

In this most recent series of articles from John 1:35-42, we've been looking at foundations of Christian discipleship. In other words — although this is not meant to be exhaustive — what are some important aspects of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus that we see in this passage?

So far, we've looked at three primary areas:

- Genuine disciples of Jesus follow Him.
- Genuine disciples of Jesus hear and respond to His voice.
- Genuine disciples of Jesus have a desire to tell others about Him.

In my previous article, we began looking at a disciple named Andrew who was always taking people to Jesus. Secondly, along with always taking people to Jesus, Andrew is an example of a disciple of Jesus who is completely content to be in the background. Even though he was in the group that included Peter, James and John, he's never shown to be the front man or the man of prominence. Peter is always the leader, and the brothers James and John, the "Sons of Thunder" (Mk. 3:17), also have more prominence than Andrew. We know that of these four, it was only Peter, James and John who were taken by Jesus to the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt. 17). Andrew is not there, but we don't get any hint of jealousy or bitterness because he was not included.

Dr. John MacArthur, in his book "Twelve Ordinary Men," writes that Andrew "did not seek to be the center of attention. He didn't seem to resent those who labored in the limelight. He was evidently pleased to do what he could with the gifts and calling God had bestowed on him, and he allowed others to do likewise."

The Church of Jesus Christ needs quiet servants, like Andrew, who don't seek the limelight and are more than glad for others to have places of prominence in which to serve. These types of people just want to serve in the background and, by doing so, point people to Jesus.

If God calls us to service in the kingdom in an area of prominence, our service must be without pride. But we must also be willing to be in the background if that's where God places us. Andrew is a great role model for all 21st-century Christians.

Let's look briefly at Andrew's brother, Peter. In Verse 42, Andrew brings Peter to Jesus and Jesus looks intently at Peter and then changes his name from "Simon the son of John" to "Cephas," which means Peter. Both Cephas (Aramaic) and Peter (Greek) mean "rock." There's much that's been written about this name change. Scholars note the Old Testament importance of the meaning of a person's name. A person's name stood for the whole person. Along with the naming of a person, in the giving of a new name there's an assertion of the authority of the giver (2 Kgs. 23:34; 24:17).

In the Old Testament when a name change is given by God, there's an added nuance in that it speaks of the new character: for example, in the name change of Jacob (he cheats/supplants) to Israel (he strives with God).

A name change can also speak of a future character change that God intends. This seems to best describe the intent that Jesus has for the change that will ultimately take place in Peter's life. In the beginning, Peter is anything but a rock. But, by grace, Peter will surely change for the better, over time.

As we close, what have we learned about what it means to be a genuine disciple of Jesus? Although this is not meant to be exhaustive, I want to make a few brief — and I hope helpful — points:

— To be a genuine disciple of Jesus, you must first be a Christian. This is to say that, by God's grace, you acknowledge that you're a sinner without hope except in his sovereign mercy. You must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and savior of sinners, and you receive and rest upon him alone as he is offered in the gospel. You resolve and promise in humble reliance on the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes a follower of Christ (adapted from PCA membership vows 1-3). When God graciously saves a person, he or she will have new desires for the things of God rather than only selfish desires (although Christians certainly can succumb to selfish desires, as well). These new desires, by God's grace, will include, at least, the following:

— Jesus must be our priority in life. We've seen this truth in the example of John the Baptist who — although he had many of his own followers — was always pointing them to Jesus. We certainly love many people in this life, including family and friends, but we must never put them in a priority place above Jesus.

— We must follow Jesus wherever he leads. His ways are always better than something else that we may decide we want for ourselves, things that are not according to his word.

— We must hear his voice given in his word, the Scriptures, and obey. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." (John 10:27)

— We must have a servant's heart. Andrew gives us an example of always desiring to serve in the background.

— The church that Jesus died for must be a lifelong priority for Christians. This is not a statement about merely loving the church universal. Rather, every Christian is called to love and rightly connect to a local expression of the universal church for worship, including placing ourselves and our family under the authority and regular ministries of word and sacrament. Regularly gathering with God's people for Lord's Day worship is to be seen as a necessity, not an option. It's in doing all these things and more that we foundationally know the joy of being a follower of Jesus.

Later in John's gospel, Jesus tells of the love that he has for his disciples. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." (John 15:9-11) The Bible teaches that there's no more joyful life that anyone can have than a life of following Jesus.

May all Christians continue to testify, by word and deed, that our lives are lives that are most blessed, no matter what we may be going through.