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THE MARKS
OF DISCIPLESHIP

CHARACTERISTICS OF
A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST

After I graduated from college, I worked a few years for one of the major automobile companies. Some of that time was spent on the loading dock in a shipping and receiving department. During the summers, the heat inside the trucks that I helped to load could be suffocating. That could make the guys' tempers a little short.

One especially hot afternoon, as I was helping one of the drivers arrange his load, he grinned at me and said, "You're a religious man, aren't you?"

I was surprised by his question. This was the first time we had met, and our conversation in the few minutes we had been together hadn't progressed beyond the usual superficial observations about the weather.

"As a matter of fact, I am," I replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I noticed that you don't talk like the other fellas who help me," he answered. "Most of them would be cussing by now because of the heat. You haven't said one swear word."

I was pleased that he had seen something in my behavior that seemed to him to reflect genuine Christianity. Yet I was sobered by the reminder that others I worked with on a daily basis would also be looking for proof of the reality of my commitment to Christ. How consistent was I under the close scrutiny of those who knew me best? Did I have the marks of a genuine Christian?

When sharing my faith, I had often heard people respond by saying, “I used to know someone who believed like you do . . .” They would usually go on to describe some major character flaw reflected in that person’s life. It was clear that my listeners felt such a shortcoming invalidated the other person’s claim to the title of “Christian.”

SOMETHING THAT SETS US APART

I would explain that Christians aren’t sinless, only forgiven. But such reasoning hardly seemed convincing to them. If anything, my argument usually brought to mind other inconsistencies among those they knew who claimed to belong to Christ. The general assumption seemed to be that, although Christians aren’t perfect, they should be different. There should be something that sets them apart as disciples. The Scriptures agree.

Horatius Bonar, the Scottish pastor and hymn writer of the nineteenth century, made this observation about the nature of the Christian life: “It is to new life that God is calling us; not to some new steps in life, some new habits or motives or prospects, but to *a new life*.”¹

Discipleship is not primarily a matter of what we do. It is an outgrowth of what we are. Yet if this is true, it is reasonable for others to expect to see proof of the reality of our commitment to Christ reflected in the way that we live. Jesus’ observation regarding false prophets is also true of disciples. They are recognizable by the fruit they produce: “By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matthew 7:16–17).

So what are the marks of a disciple? Jesus Himself identified several important characteristics.

THE MARK OF BAPTISM

The first mark of a disciple is baptism. It is one of the first acts that identifies us as followers of Jesus Christ and initiates us into a life of obedience. When Jesus commissioned the church to go and make disciples of all nations, He identified baptism as the first of the two central tasks of disciple making (Matthew 28:19). After Christ's ascension, baptism continued to have a prominent place in apostolic preaching and practice. On the Day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter commanded those who believed to "repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Although Christians differ over how baptism should take place (it has been done by sprinkling, pouring, and immersion), all agree that baptism is the initiatory rite of the Christian faith. John Calvin called it "the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church."²

It is a rite that has both individual and corporate significance. On the one hand, baptism symbolizes to observers and the individual alike the person's union with Christ in death and resurrection (Romans 6:3–4). At the same time, it signifies that the believer has also been joined to the larger fellowship of the church: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Baptism by water also symbolizes the believer's entrance into the sphere of the Holy Spirit.³ The metaphor of drinking in 1 Corinthians 12:13 points to the Holy Spirit's ministry at our innermost level. The Holy Spirit is said to "live" in every believer and His controlling presence is more powerful than the presence of the sinful nature (Romans 8:9). But the benefit we receive from His ministry is not merely an individual one. Those who are individually joined to Christ by their union with the Spirit are also joined to one another. Water baptism signifies my entrance into the community of the Spirit.

Similarly, the symbolism of baptism serves as a public statement of the believer's personal commitment to Christ and conveys a promise

from God to the believer. Baptism, according to John Calvin, is a public confession before men. “Indeed,” he explained, “it is the mark by which we publicly profess that we wish to be reckoned God’s people, by which we testify that we agree in worshipping the same God, in one religion with all Christians; by which finally we openly affirm our faith.”⁴ The apostle Peter used the legal language of contractual agreements to refer to baptism when he called it “the pledge of a good conscience toward God” in 1 Peter 3:21. The Greek term that is translated “pledge” literally meant “answer” and referred to a legal procedure in which questions were asked and commitments made on the part of those who entered into a contractual arrangement with one another. Baptism is a pledge of commitment made to God that springs from the cleansing that has come through faith in Christ.

On God’s part, however, baptism contains an implied promise of forgiveness. New Testament preaching linked baptism to the promise of cleansing from sin (Acts 2:38; 22:16; cf. Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). The connection between these two, however, is not an automatic one. The Bible does not teach that the rite of baptism in and of itself conveys the forgiveness of sin. Although Peter wrote that baptism “now saves you,” he clarified that it is actually the resurrection of Christ that does the saving and not the water of baptism (1 Peter 3:21). When some in the Corinthian church began to boast about who had baptized them and divide into factions in the name of their favorite apostle, Paul wrote that he was glad that he had baptized so few. “For Christ did not send me to baptize,” he declared, “but to preach the gospel” (1 Corinthians 1:17). Such a statement makes no sense if baptism is the means of obtaining forgiveness through Christ.

Because it symbolizes the believer’s union with Christ through the Holy Spirit, baptism also contains an implicit promise of transformation. Baptism’s picture of burial and resurrection points to a radical change in the believer’s nature: “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:4). Those who are in Christ are alive in a way that was not true prior to Christ.

The apostle Paul linked baptism with the Old Testament rite of circumcision and said that those who have been baptized have “put off” the old nature (Colossians 2:11–12). New Testament scholar C. E. B. Cranfield commented, “Paul expresses in the most decisive and emphatic way the truth of our having died with Christ; for burial is the seal set to the fact of death—it is when a man’s relatives and friends leave his body in a grave and return home without him that the fact that he no longer shares their life is exposed with inescapable conclusiveness.”⁵

All who enter into a relationship with Christ die to the old self. Positively, they have been “clothed” with Christ (Galatians 3:27).

God’s promise in baptism is the promise of forgiveness and a new life. My commitment in baptism is the pledge to live in accordance with the change that Christ has brought about in me by His death and resurrection.

THE MARK OF OBEDIENCE

True discipleship is also marked by obedience. The second major component of Jesus’ directive in the Great Commission was to teach disciples “to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). Obedience is not optional for the Christian. As Jesus’ popularity increased, He warned followers that obedience would be the true test of their discipleship. According to John 8:31–32, “To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”

Passages like this can make us uncomfortable because they seem to imply that our status as disciples is earned. There is a condition here, but its force is one of evidence rather than of cause. Jesus did not say that we become disciples by holding to His teaching. The obedience spoken of here proves that those who obey were truly His disciples in the first place. This may sound like a semantic game, but the order is vitally important. If discipleship depends upon my obedience, then the primary focus of Jesus’ statement is on my ability to comply with all

that God commands. If, on the other hand, obedience depends upon the reality of my discipleship relationship with Jesus Christ, the primary focus is on Christ Himself. In John 8:31–32 discipleship comes before obedience. Obedience is the consequence, not the cause.

Rooted in God's Grace

The Scriptures speak of two very different kinds of obedience. One could be called “legalistic” obedience. The other might be described as “grace-rooted” obedience. Legalistic obedience is rooted in human effort and achievement—obeying God’s commands in order to earn a righteous standing in God’s sight. In Paul’s day those who depended upon religious rituals to make themselves right with God epitomized this kind of obedience. It is the polar opposite of grace-rooted obedience (Galatians 5:3–4). The objective in legalistic obedience may seem like a good one—the observance of God’s commands—but it is flawed because it overestimates the human capacity to comply. It produces an obedience that is grounded in self rather than in God.

Grace, like legalism, also has obedience to God’s commands as its objective. According to Romans 2:14, it is not those who hear God’s Law who are declared righteous but those who obey it. But the difference with obedience that’s rooted in grace is that it is grounded in Christ’s righteousness rather than my own. It is “the obedience that comes from faith” (Romans 1:5). For the Christian, faith *is* obedience because it focuses on the one who obeyed all God’s commands on my behalf. When I trust in Jesus Christ, my faith is credited to me as righteousness (Romans 4:5). Grace-rooted obedience recognizes that righteousness can only be received as a gift. It cannot be earned as a wage. My obedience is an expression of gratitude for that gift.

It is not surprising, then, that Jesus repeatedly identified love as the primary motive for obedience. “If you love me,” He told His disciples, “you will obey what I command.” “He who does not love me,” He warned, “will not obey my teaching” (John 14:15, 24).

Rooted in Our Relationship with Jesus

There are other motives for obedience mentioned in Scripture that seem more “selfish.” Grace-rooted obedience does not look for a wage, but it does expect to be rewarded. Yet even these rewards are ultimately rooted in our relationship to Jesus Christ. For example, Jesus promised those who kept His teaching that its truth would make them free (John 8:32). In the context of John’s gospel, however, truth is not merely a set of propositions. Ultimately it is embodied in the person of Christ Himself. “I am the way and the truth and the life,” Jesus declared. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). “The truth of which John writes,” explained commentator Leon Morris, “is the truth that is bound up with the Person and work of Jesus.”⁶

There is propositional content to the truth of Christ. Those who rejected Him rejected His teaching. Conversely, when Jesus said that those who held to His teaching would find the truth, ultimately He meant that they would find Him. They would enter into a relationship with the one who is truth. Those who believe in Jesus receive the person of Christ (John 1:12). “Jesus is clear that this truth, that truth that is the way and the life, is himself,” William Willimon observed. “We really [would] have no idea what the truth is, living as we do in a culture of lies, had not Jesus shown us a life that is true to God.”⁷

Likewise, the freedom spoken of in John 8:31–32 is not primarily a matter of social status. I find freedom in Christ who is the truth because I enter into an entirely new relationship with God, with His Law, and even with myself. Because Christ took upon Himself the curse that is the consequence of disobedience to God’s Law, even though He Himself had never disobeyed it, I am free from that Law’s penalty. I am no longer under what Paul called “the curse of the law” (Galatians 3:13). This blunt phrase is a forceful reminder of how desperate bondage to sin truly is. In itself God’s Law is holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12). The Law’s weakness is our sinful nature. The Law is spiritual; we are unspiritual, “sold as a slave to sin” (Romans 7:14). When God’s Law comes into contact with our sinful condition, the result is toxic.

I recently read the news story of a woman who suffered from a food allergy so severe that if she were to eat certain foods like peanut butter, she would go into shock and eventually die. When her husband kissed her on the cheek after eating the same foods, her face broke out in welts. In her case, what was intended to nourish instead had the potential to kill. This is similar to the effect that God's Law has on the sinful nature. When it comes in contact with the Law, the sinful nature produces a desire for the very thing that God's Law forbids (Romans 7:8). Paul described the tragic result this way: "The very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death" (Romans 7:10).

Christ's death frees us from slavery to the sinful nature and gives us a new freedom to obey (John 8:34–36; Romans 6:18, 22).

Rooted in a Desire for Answered Prayer

Answered prayer is another motive for obedience in the Christian life. In 1 John 3:21–22 we seem to be promised unlimited answers to our prayers: "Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him." J. C. Ryle echoed this verse when he observed, "The name of Jesus is a never-failing passport to our prayers. In that name a man may draw near to God with boldness and ask with confidence."⁸

However, although answers to prayer are indeed guaranteed in this passage, those answers are limited by several important qualifications. First, the promise is made to those who have a clear conscience. Only those whose "hearts do not condemn" them and who "have confidence before God" can be assured that they will receive anything they ask. Second, the promise is made to those who are in tune with God. They "obey His commands and do what pleases Him." It is no wonder, then, that their prayers are answered. It's not because they have earned the right to receive their requests from God, but because they know how to ask "according to his will" (1 John 5:14). In other words, the secret is in the relationship.

THE MARK OF ABIDING FRUIT

According to Jesus, prayer leads to personal transformation. Those who “abide” in Christ pray in a way that results in spiritual fruit. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you,” Jesus said, “ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (John 15:7–8). Earlier, Jesus had compared His relationship with the disciples to that of a vine. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Results are expected of the disciple, but they are the results of being connected to the vine. It is the life of the vine that generates the fruit.

What We Do

Yet there is clearly an element of personal responsibility involved in this. Believers are commanded to remain in the vine and to remain in Christ’s love (John 15:4, 9). Jesus did not explain further what is meant by “abiding,” but the context provides several clues.

First, those who abide recognize their dependency upon Christ. The command to abide is not a call to shift the focus from Christ to myself. Although the believer has the responsibility of abiding, it is not possible to produce fruit apart from Christ, who said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). When I abide, I am conscious that everything Christ commands of me Christ must also produce in me. It is a state that might be described as “actively passive.” It is both active and passive at the same time.

Second, those who abide recognize the importance of Scripture. Abiding in the vine means that I will allow Christ’s Word to dwell in me. There is something more to this than a simple command to read the Bible. It is a command to allow Christ’s Word to impact my life at its deepest level. To abide in Christ’s Word is to know it and embrace it. Commentator Leon Morris noted that the language of abiding was used by the rabbis to speak of studying the Torah.⁹ Christ’s Word plays

a critical role in spiritual growth because it contains promises and commands. The promises tell me what to expect of God, and the commands tell me what to expect of myself. In fact, these are related. Christ's commands are grounded in His promises to me.

Third, those who abide recognize their responsibility to pray. The connection between prayer and the fruit promised by Jesus further underscores the role that God plays in this process. If producing spiritual fruit were purely a matter of determined effort, there would be no need to "ask whatever you wish." Why ask God for what we alone can produce? The very fact that we must ask is an indication that fruit is something that can come only from God.

Fourth, those who abide recognize the need to grow further. Branches that produced grapes for only one season would not have been considered very fruitful. It is not merely fruitfulness that Christ desires but continuing fruitfulness. Fortunately for us, the Father is actively involved in making certain that those who have produced fruit will continue to do so. He "prunes" every branch so that it will be even more fruitful (John 15:2). Jesus does not elaborate on what is involved in the pruning process. The image of pruning itself suggests a cutting away of that which is unproductive or "dead" in the believer's life. The word that is translated "prune" in John 15:2 can also mean "cleanse." Jesus' assurance to the disciples that they had already been cleansed by His word (v. 3) points to that same word as the Father's main pruning agent.

What the Fruit Looks Like

Christ does not expect His disciples to bear a little fruit, but "much fruit," and He expects it to be "fruit that will last" (John 15:8, 16). But what does this spiritual fruit look like? Several lists are found elsewhere in Scripture. Paul described a list of character traits that he calls the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22–23 and the "fruit of the light" in Ephesians 5:9. Colossians 1:10 speaks of good works as a type of fruit, and the author of Hebrews calls worship "the fruit of lips that confess his name" (Hebrews 13:15). James wrote that the wisdom that

comes from heaven as a gift to all who ask is “full of mercy and good fruit” (James 3:17).

In the context of John 15, however, Jesus emphasizes the importance of the fruit of love (v. 12). Love is so important that elsewhere Jesus identifies it as the one mark that will convince the world that we are genuine disciples. “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34–35).

THE MARK OF LOVE

Francis Schaeffer called love “the mark of a Christian” and said that it is the church’s final apologetic before a watching world. “Jesus is giving a right to the world,” he wrote. “Upon his authority he gives the world the right to judge whether you and I are born-again Christians on the basis of our observable love toward all Christians.”¹⁰ Our obligation, of course, is not limited exclusively to Christians (Mark 12:28–31; Luke 10:27). Christ has commanded us to love everyone, whether they are believers or not. But there is a special obligation when it comes to other believers. We are to “do good to all people, [but] especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10).

The Origin of Our Love

The apostle John identified love as the distinguishing mark of those who know God (1 John 4:7–8). His argument was simple. If love has its origin in God, then we ought to love because we have our origin in God. If we belong to Him, we ought, in some measure, to be like Him.

Lovers often adopt the same interests. When a man who can’t tell a French horn from a piano falls in love with someone who is fond of classical music, he may find that he suddenly wants tickets to the symphony. It is one of the characteristics of love. If the one I love is interested in something, I will cultivate an interest in the same thing. People

who have been married for a long time often begin to talk like one another. Some even begin to resemble each other physically.

The same principle holds true in our relationship with God. If we love God, we will want to be like Him. We will love what God loves. This would be easy if those whom God loves were always lovable. Unfortunately, He has a penchant for loving the unlovely and for setting His affection on those who don't love Him back. We shouldn't be surprised. This was our own experience. "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19 KJV).

Our obligation to love as Christ loves is further challenged by today's confused notions about the nature of love. We talk about "falling in love" as if it were some kind of a ditch that we stumbled into. Husbands and wives break their marriage vows because they "love" someone else. People who commit sexual immorality say that they are "making love." If we are to bear the identifying mark of love, we had better know what true love is like.

True Biblical Love

Biblical love is active. It is reflected more in what we do than in how we feel. Today's society views love primarily as an emotion. Although emotion plays a part, its role is secondary. In this respect, love is much like faith. C. S. Lewis has defined faith as "the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted in spite of your changing moods."¹¹ Moods change so that what seemed likely one day looks improbable the next. The role of faith, Lewis argued, is to tell your moods "where they get off."¹² Moods also change with regard to people. I can feel affectionate toward someone today and cold toward the same person tomorrow. Like faith, there are times when love needs to tell my emotions where to "get off." Love, like faith, involves an exercise of the will.

True love isn't necessarily feeling good about another person. It is acting towards them in a way that is pleasing to God and appropriate to their need.

It is possible to feel powerful emotion for the brother or sister who

is in need and still refuse to help him or her, even though I have the means. In such a case all I have experienced is an empty emotion. In fact, according to James, such behavior isn't just an expression of false love; ultimately it is false faith. "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food," he wrote. "If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:15–17). Similarly, John warned that anyone who has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, does not have the love of God in him.

Our love is to go beyond words. We are to "love . . . with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:18). If love is ultimately my commitment to act in a loving way toward another, it is possible for me to show love toward someone even when my feelings haven't quite caught up with my commitment. This doesn't mean that we should be satisfied with love that is cold and calculating. According to 1 Peter 1:22, we are to "love one another deeply, from the heart." A church where the prevailing spirit says, "I love you but I don't really like you" is unlikely to have much of an impact on the world.

Biblical love is also inclusive. It is open to those who are unlike it. Nowhere is this seen more vividly than in the church. Christ often brings together unlikely people. We can see this in Jesus' own disciples: a fisherman, a revolutionary, a doctor, a government minion. One wonders how they all got along with each other. The truth is, they didn't. Sometimes they got on one another's nerves. They argued and tried to outdo each other (Mark 9:34). They even criticized Jesus at times (Matthew 26:8–9). Yet through it all Jesus repeatedly called them back to this command: "Love one another."

Love That Grows

Biblical love is expansive. It is a love that grows. In 1 John 4:17 the apostle spoke of the need for love to be "made complete" in us. The idea conveyed in the original text is that love will be brought to full measure.

But how does this take place? John explains that it comes about when we live in God's love: "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him" (1 John 4:16–17). The secret is not in trying harder. It is in living closer. The way to grow in love is to live in God's love.

The love that Christ commands me to have is the same love that I have experienced. That is why it is such an important evidence of true faith.

A REALITY CHECK

Discipleship is faith expressed in practice. But there is far more to it than merely watching your language on the loading dock. At its heart, it is a living relationship with the Christ we love, serve, and seek to imitate. For many, if not all of us, however, there is room for considerable improvement. Merely cosmetic changes will not help us. Christ is not calling us to put on appearances. Neither should we deny the depth of our problem.

Our best hope is to take a good hard look at ourselves and determine which of the marks of discipleship are missing. If having a relationship with Christ is the key to being a true disciple, repentance is always the first step in that relationship.