

# Marks of True Christian Discipleship: Reflections from Mark 10:35-45

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the marks of true Christian discipleship. The term discipleship appears about 270 times in the New Testament, thus signifying its important place in Christian life. The essence of Christian discipleship is learning where Jesus is the teacher (Rabbi) while the disciples (Christians) are the pupils. In the process of learning virtues including listening, imitation, obedience, dependence and direction are inevitable components. The disciples of Jesus were blind to the true significance of Jesus and what he was doing. They did not understand his mission as well as their own mission. They therefore thought of discipleship in terms of greatness. Conversely, the marks of true discipleship are suffering, servant hood and self-sacrifice.

**Key Words:** Discipleship, Meaning of Discipleship, Discipleship Process, Marks of True Discipleship.

## 1. Introduction

The term 'discipleship' is used about 270 times in the New Testament (NT) (Wilson, 2001), thus indicating plainly that it is of prime importance in the Christian life, but then who is a disciple and what is the essence of discipleship? The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines 'disciple' as 'a follower of a religious, political, artistic e.t.c leader'. This implies that 'the disciples of Jesus Christ' are his followers. They are the so called Christians or the 'followers of the way' by Saint Luke (see Acts 22:4; 24:14). The early Christians were referred to as 'followers of the way' because they followed the way of Christ. In other words, they were his disciples, his followers. What then is the essence of the discipleship?

The Kiswahili word used for 'disciple' is *Mwanafunzi* which means a student or a learner. The Latin word for the disciple is *discipulus* which still means a 'pupil' or a 'learner' and it corresponds to the Greek *mathetes* which comes from *manthano* meaning 'to learn' (Marshall, et. al. 1996: 277). A disciple is therefore basically a pupil/student/learner of a teacher. This explains why Jesus was called by his contemporaries 'a Rabbi' (teacher). Although he was not officially recognized by the Jewish authorities as a teacher (Jn. 7:14f), he was popularly known as *Rabbi* and his associates were known as disciples (see Mk. 9:5; 11:21; Jn. 1:35). The essence of discipleship is therefore 'learning'. This is not just an abrupt learning but 'learning as we go along'. Dunn Wilson explains this better by asserting that,

As far as we can tell from the Gospel records, Jesus did not give his disciples an intensive course of teaching before he called them. He did not explain the terms of their contract or instruct them in proper conduct. He simply said, 'Follow me' and it was after that, we are told, that 'He began to teach his disciples. Jesus was still teaching his disciples after his resurrection. He was still teaching them at the moment of his ascension and, even then he had promised to send them the Holy Spirit who would 'lead them into all truth' (2001:6)

What is however clear as we shall see from the biblical text which I have chosen to use in this paper, that is, Mark 10:35-45, the followers of Jesus seem to have been poor learners. In fact it was only after the Holy Spirit came upon them that some of them began to live up to the expectations which Jesus had of them. So, discipleship entails following the teacher as the learner learns new things day by day. Disciples of Christ must therefore follow him as he continues to teach them new things every second, minute, hour or even a day.

## 2. Exploring Discipleship from Mark 10:35-45<sup>1</sup>

In the immediate context of this text, that is, Mark 10:33-34 (NIV), Jesus tells his disciples that,

We are going to Jerusalem . . . the son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise (see also Mtt. 20:18-19).

This is the third time Jesus is predicting his death to his disciples.<sup>1</sup> What is however very clear is that, the

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<sup>1</sup> This text was purposely chosen because of its rich teaching on discipleship. It shows clearly how the disciples of Jesus as poor learners misunderstood the teachings of their master. The marks of discipleship which I want to bring forth are well illustrated in this text.

disciples did not understand what Jesus meant and yet they feared to ask. In Mark 9:32, we read 'But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it'. The weakness of a learner or pupil is not so much on his/her inability to understand, but his/her failure to ask. The Swahili people of Kenya say *Kuuliza si ujinga* (Asking is not a sign of foolishness). This implies that asking is a virtue in case we do not understand. This is possibly what differentiates Saint Paul from the twelve disciples. Unlike the twelve who kept quiet afraid to ask, yet they did not understand what their teacher taught, Paul during his encounter with Jesus asked 'Who are you Lord?' (See Acts 9:5a). The response he got was 'I am Jesus whom you persecute' (Acts 9:5b). This way Paul was able to understand that it was Jesus who was speaking to him and that Jesus was not happy with his (Paul's) persecution of Christians. Disciples as they learn new things must learn to ask where they do not understand. The twelve disciples of Christ lacked this quality.

An important thing to note however, is that the 'disciples of Jesus' were not limited to the twelve only. The word disciple can be used of all who responded to his message (Mtt. 5:1; Lk.6:17; 19:37). It presupposes Jesus' invitation in general terms (Marshall, 1996:277). All those called by him are his disciples or pupils. This means that Christians are Jesus' disciples. Discipleship thus involves personal allegiance to him, expressed in following him and giving him an exclusive loyalty (See Mk. 8: 34-38; Lk. 14:26-33). Roger Bowen says that the biggest weakness of the disciples was that they were blind to the true significance of Jesus and what he was doing. They could not recognize his mission or their own mission (1996:32). Do today's disciples (Christians) understand the mission and teachings of their Master/teacher?

Wilson (2001:7-8) gives us important virtues to master in the process of learning or discipleship. Christians need to keep on weighing themselves against these qualities so as to know whether they are living in line with their calling of discipleship. These are:

**i) Listening:** The basis of all learning is a readiness to listen to the one teaching us. The Gospels record about many formal teaching sessions which Jesus held with his disciples but, besides these, they must have spent many hours simply listening to Jesus as they walked along together, rested by the roadside or shared their simple meals. It pays for the Christians (disciples) to listen to their teacher (Jesus) through prayer, fellowship, scripture et cetera. Of course God has many ways of communicating to us but perhaps one of the most important skills to learn in the process of Christian discipleship is the ability to listen to what Jesus (teacher) is telling us. The imperative place of self-reflection in Christian life as one keenly listens to the voice of the Master cannot be overstated. 'What is the Lord telling or teaching me?' Every experience in the life of a Christian has a lesson to teach him or her. To African Christians, this suggestion may seem extraneous due to the forlorn situations they encounter daily as they come face to face with realities of poverty, unemployment, tribal animosity, injustice, corruption, terrorism, e.t.c. It is however important to realize that Jesus' promise in John 14:16 applies to all disciples regardless of their race, colour or status. In their desperate situation, Jesus said to the disciples, 'I will ask the father, and he will give you another Helper, who will stay with you forever'. The duty of all disciples is thus to keep on listening to what the Holy Spirit is telling or teaching them in all situations. In his reference to the African Christians whom he feels that have not been allowed to experience the power of the Holy Spirit in their situation, J.N.K. Mugambi says that,

Africans have responded in their own way to the Gospel . . . The Holy Spirit empowers Christians to respond to their own needs as appropriate if not impeded by external burdens. They may need encouragement, counsel, moral material and financial support-but they must carry their own cross in the context of their own cultural limitations and opportunities (1995:xiii-xiv).

What Professor Mugambi is suggesting in other words is 'Let African disciples listen to what the Holy Spirit is telling them in their own cultural situations'. The challenge is whether they are willing to listen. The disciples must learn to listen to their Master.

**ii) Imitation:** How, then does Jesus teach us? Jesus gives the first clue by elucidating that 'A disciple is not above his teacher but everyone who is fully-trained will be like his teacher' (Lk. 6:40). The word 'like' in Greek is a strong word. It implies that a pupil will become a 'copy' of his/her teacher. Thomas Kempis in his famous book, *The Imitation of Christ* gave us a very good indication of one way in which Jesus teaches his followers. He said that they learn by imitating their master (1441). He wrote 'Wherefore let our sovereign study be in the life of Jesus Christ . . . for whoever will understand the words of Christ plainly . . . must study to conform all his life to His life'. This is possibly what Paul had in mind when said 'Imitate me as I imitate Christ' (1 Cor. 11:1). Bruce Milne's description of Jesus Christ, the God-man's character may possibly help the disciples as they learn to imitate him. He informs us that Jesus lived in unbroken communion with the Father, in fullest obedience to his will and he perfectly embodied the commandment to love one's neighbour (Mtt.9:36; Jn. 13:1, 34; 15:12-16). As the 'man for others' he did not keep himself to himself, but gave himself fully for fellow men and women. His

<sup>1</sup> For the first and second prediction of Jesus' death in Jerusalem see Mk 8:31 and Mk 9: 31 respectively. The same is found in Mtt.16:21 and 17:22-23.

death manifests his self-giving spirit (Mk.10:45; Rom.5:8; Gal.2:20; 1Jn.3:16). In relation to the created order, Jesus manifested true sensitivity to the creaturely order around him, recognizing it as the work of God (Mtt.6:26-30) (1982:149-150). This is what being like him or imitating him means: Ceaseless communion and fellowship with God, perpetual love to the neighbours and showing unwavering concern to the environment.

**iii) Obedience:** The Christians (learners) must be prepared to follow the example that Jesus gave us. Disobedient pupils are unlikely to benefit from their teacher's instruction. Being a 'disciple' means accepting 'discipline', the discipline which Jesus lovingly imposes upon his disciples (see Mtt. 5-7). From the Sermon on the Mount (Mtt.5-7), it is apparent that Jesus demands nothing less than a new manner of life from his disciples. In this Wilson (2001:8) is even more critical. He says 'Unless we live differently from non-Christians, all our claims of being followers of Christ, all our singing and praying, all our evangelization and missioning will have little significance'. A new life calls for new righteousness exemplified by a new standard of conformity to God's will (Mtt.5:20); new human relationships marked by love, forgiveness and generosity (Mtt. 5:21-26, 38-48); new integrity shown by faithful relationships and honesty (Mtt. 5: 27-42); and new selflessness indicated by endless generosity towards others (Mtt.6:1-4). Living a new life is what shows that the pupils are obedient to what the teacher tells them.

**iv) Dependence:** Dunn Wilson takes this as the most challenging task among the virtues. He says,

Few of us would claim to be that 'good' and, even if we could, we would probably spoil it by becoming spiritually proud. It is one thing to know what we should do, quite another to achieve it . . . . We cannot achieve it! By ourselves we are too morally damaged and too spiritually weak to achieve it. When we have achieved this honest self-appraisal, Jesus is able to teach us by our very weakness to depend upon him completely (2001:8).

Discipleship is a living relationship with Jesus, experiencing his presence in our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit (Wilson 2001:8). Saint Paul explains that Jesus made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness (Phil. 2:7). This shows that from the very beginning, he chose to be identified with humanity. The disciples must thus understand their inability to succeed due to their many weaknesses. Once they realize this, they must learn to depend on him in all situations. For instance, we may discover that we are too tainted with hatred to forgive our enemies, but Jesus- who is now in us (Emmanuel) - can forgive them for he has no hatred. This is tantamount what Wilford Woodruff refers to as a 'Humble reliance on God'. According to Woodruff (2011), all our strength, our hope and our power come from God, not men. He is the only source of true strength. It upon this realization that disciples should sing like Woodruff, 'Why did the Lord choose such a weak person as me . . . ? I am entirely dependent upon the Lord . . . . We have no power in ourselves'

**v) Direction:** When I was a small boy I used to hear brethren sing in Kimeru (a Kenyan language) that, *Ninkumbuka mbume n thi jji* (I will fly and leave this world). But is it possible to leave this world and live in another world out there? We can learn something from the Transfiguration experience recorded in the Synoptic Gospels ( Mtt. 17:1-13; Mk. 9:2-13; Lk. 9:28-36). According to Wilson (2001:9), this event was a dramatic illustration of something that Jesus always did to his disciples. He was continually directing their attention beyond the present material world and urging them to see God himself. The world around them was to be understood as a book in which they could read the presence, nature and purpose of the unseen God. Therefore, we cannot fly away and leave the world. Jesus clearly teaches his disciples that every experience is redolent with the presence of God. I am not suggesting that we adopt a fatalistic approach to life (an attitude that says that everything that happens is God's will), but if we do take God's word seriously we cannot ignore the question of Prophet Amos, 'When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?' (Amos 3:6b). The disciples must learn to see God's, action, power and authority in all the events of this world.

## 2.1 The Request of James and John

David Gitari, the former Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Kenya feels that among the twelve disciples of Jesus, the two sons of Zebedee (James and John) were the most ambitious. He goes on to explain that while there is nothing wrong in being ambitious, it would be wrong to crash others as one seeks the position of leadership or power (2005:3).

In Mark's Gospel, James and John went to Jesus and said to him 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask'. Jesus asked them, 'What do you want me to do for you?' They then replied, 'Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory'. This is a hilarious request especially after Jesus had just finished predicting his death. It confirms our earlier argument that the disciples did not understand the teachings or even the mission of Jesus. Jesus was disclosing to them the disgrace that awaited him in Jerusalem, yet they could not understand. Rather than asking what he meant, they were thinking in terms of greatness. They thought that discipleship meant achieving power and authority in this world. John Hargreaves elucidates that the request of these two brothers was a selfish desire to hold more important positions than the other disciples when Jesus became King in Jerusalem (1965: 172). Although it is not wrong to have ambition as Gitari (2005) correctly observes, this was obviously the wrong kind of ambition.

What might have made James and John feel that they required a special treatment than the other disciples in Jesus' Kingdom? Saint Matthew in his Gospel, records that the two disciples sent their mother to request Jesus on their behalf (Mtt. 20:20-21). She said to Jesus, 'Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your Kingdom' (Mtt. 20:21). William Barclay informs us that the mother of these two disciples (wife of Zebedee) was called Salome and she was probably the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus. If this was the case, then James and John were first cousins of Jesus. Therefore, they may have felt that their close relationship to Jesus entitled them a special or a higher place in his Kingdom (1975:253). The other possible reason of their request pertains what they had left behind to follow Jesus. Mark 1: 14-20 records the calling of the disciples by Jesus as they were fishing along the shore of Lake Galilee. First, he saw Simon (Peter) and his brother Andrew catching fish with a net. He said to them, 'Come, follow me. I will make you fishers of men'. At once they left their nets and went with him (Mk.1:16-18). As he went farther, he saw James and his brother John, sons of Zebedee in a boat preparing their nets. Then he called them and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with hired men and followed him (Mk. 1:19-20). An important thing to note is that while Simon and Andrew had only nets, James and John had a boat, nets and hired men. If they could afford a boat, nets and workers, then James and John came from a better family background than Simon and Andrew who had only nets. In other words, they were richer. It is this wealth that they had left to follow Jesus. They therefore probably felt that since they had left lots of their property to follow Jesus, this guaranteed them a special place in Jesus' Kingdom. They had totally misconstrued the implications of discipleship. In the next section I shall discuss the marks of true discipleship basing my arguments as much as possible in Jesus' teachings in the Gospels particularly our selected text (Mark 10:35- 45).

### **3. Marks of True Discipleship**

From the dialogue of Jesus with his disciples in Mark 10:35-45, we can deduce the main marks of discipleship. These are suffering, servant hood and self-sacrifice. I shall discuss them in detail in this section.

#### **3.1 Suffering**

In our text Jesus tells James and John that 'You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?' (Mk.10:38). In other words Jesus is asking them 'Are you ready to suffer the way I will suffer?' The disciples thought of discipleship in terms of success, happiness or greatness, but Jesus teaches the opposite. The son of man will be 'betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law who will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him' ( Mk.10:33-34). His disciples must be prepared to go through the same. Hargreaves (1965:172) explains this further by denoting that a 'cup' was often thought of as holding bitter drink while being 'baptized' is sometimes translated as 'passing through waters' that were thought as dangerous. So the two words together means 'suffering' and 'danger'. He goes on to say argue that ' To be like Jesus is one way in which every single Christian can be like him by suffering willingly'.

Jesus confirms this by telling his followers that, 'Whoever does not carry his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple' (Lk.14:27). Being Jesus' disciple is tantamount to willingness to carry ones cross and follow him. Jesus however warned the disciples that suffering would indeed come, but it would not necessarily lead to high place in the Kingdom of God, for all must endure it (Carson, et. al. 1994:967). High place is for God alone to give (Mk.10:40). On Christian suffering, Bruce Kent warns that suffering is not an optional extra for Christians. Because Christ suffered his disciples must too suffer. He then goes on to reassure that 'Suffering is redemptive and therefore the more we suffer, the better Christians we are' (2013). According to Joyce Meyer, since the Christians like the thought of sharing in Christ's glory, they must also like the thought of sharing in his suffering (2014). Saint Paul possibly knew that disciples cannot evade this mark when he said, 'I consider that our present suffering is not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us' (Rom. 8:18). Saint Peter also addresses this subject and tells the disciples of Christ that ' . . . do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering. . . . But rejoice as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. . . . However if you suffer as a Christian, don't be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name' (1 Pet.4:12-16). This shows that Christ's followers suffer so as to share in his glory. Suffering is thus an indispensable mark of Christian discipleship. Bowen (1996:32) is thus right to observe that 'The followers of Jesus have to experience crucifixion in their lives'.

#### **3.2 Servant hood**

The other notable mark of discipleship in our text is 'servant hood' or what we may refer to as 'service to others'. We read in Mark 10:42-45 that Jesus called his indignant disciples together and told them that,

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be a slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The ten disciples showed up just as badly as James and John when they were angry with them because of their



request. No doubt they had wanted these places for themselves. So Jesus explained to them once more the totally different pattern of God's Kingdom, where true greatness is humble service. He himself is the great example of this (Carson et. al. 1994: 967). Gitari (2005:5) observes that Jesus demonstrated his teaching on 'who is the greatest' by washing the disciples' feet just before the last supper. Jesus and his disciples had walked from Bethany to the upper room in Jerusalem. The feet protected only by sandals, had become exposed to sand and dust. In such circumstances the washing of feet was customary. But this was done by the servant. Unfortunately or fortunately in the upper room there was no servant. One of the disciples would have performed the task but none was willing. Nobody wanted to be called a servant of the rest. A few moments ago they had been arguing among themselves about the question of greatness. It was then that Jesus washed their feet to show them that even masters can be servants. Whoever wants to be great must be willing to become a slave of the others.<sup>1</sup> Hargreaves (1965:174) explains this by saying that true greatness is found in service. The person who serves others the most is the greatest person. Servant hood is thus one of the inevitable marks of discipleship. Christ's disciples must be willing to become servants or slaves of all. It is in realization of this that Saint Peter tells the Christians that 'Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others. . . .' (1 Pet.4:10). The disciples must exemplify humility in this service. In this regard, Saint Paul advises the disciples that 'Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves' (Phil.2:3).

### 3.3 Self-sacrifice

Arthur Waskow defines self-sacrifice or self-denial as altruistic abstinence, that is, the willingness to forego personal pleasures in pursuit of increased good of another (1991:31). True service goes with total dedication and denying oneself many worldly pleasures including even life, for 'even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' ( Mk. 10:45). This shows that in his service, Jesus was prepared to give his life or to die for others. His disciples must be prepared to do the same. Jesus thus tells them, 'Whoever comes to me cannot be my disciple unless he loves me more than he loves his father and his mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and his sisters, and himself as well' ( Lk.14:26). Whilst Jesus is not suggesting hatred to ones relatives or self-hatred, he is showing the serious allegiance and sacrifice expected from his disciples. Unless his disciples are willing to 'give up' everything and become fully committed to his service, they cannot become his disciples. The great twentieth century martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains this even better in his classical work, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He says that it is 'Cheap grace, grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ' (1937:79). In other words, if we are to be Christ's 'pupils', we must enter that state with our eyes open and acknowledge that there is a price to be paid for enrolling in his school ( Wilson 2001:9). There is a cost to pay. Jesus cautions those preparing to be his disciples to first count the cost. He tells them, 'If any one of you is planning to build a tower, he sits down first and works out what it will cost, to see if he has enough money to finish the job' ( Lk.14:28). Therefore, self-sacrifice is a virtue those wishing to be Christ's disciples must consider.

### 4. Conclusion

All Christians are called by Jesus to be his disciples or 'pupils'. Discipleship is a long journey of learning and so the disciples must discover the techniques of the journey as they proceed if they hope to succeed. An important thing for them to note is the fact that discipleship is not a position of greatness as it has been perceived by some Christians, especially church leaders. Discipleship rather calls for service in humility, total dedication and readiness to suffer for the Master. Jesus' disciples must be prepared to carry his cross. The grace of God is sufficient to the disciples, but as Bonhoeffer (1937) denotes, grace without the cross is despicable.

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<sup>1</sup> For Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet see John 13:1-17

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