

Disciples
Selected Scriptures
ABC 8/27/23

Today's going to be a little different from normal. This week was to be our church campout. For those who don't know, at the campout service I try to tie in something historical I've read recently to some biblical truths. In the past we've used things from Jedidiah Smith to internment camps for Japanese-Americans to female codebreakers of WW2 as springboards to truths of God. Although our campout was postponed until next year, the sermon I had planned has been marinating since March. Therefore, you're getting it this morning.

For the most part, we've all had good hygiene drummed into our very being. Whose mom didn't say, *wash your hands before you eat?* Having lived through Covid we've worn masks, isolated, coughed in our elbows, & washed incessantly. Sterile gloves, sterile gowns, sterile masks, & sterile operating rooms are taken for granted today. Things haven't always been this way. In the mid to late 1800s it was a massive gamble to get surgery. Many would survive the initial procedure but would get an infection from the surgery that would lead to their death. It was so bad that at one point some considered outlawing surgery altogether. Roughly 50% of surgery patients died. For us, it's not hard to understand why. Doctors would go from patient to patient wearing bloody aprons, using their bare hands with dirty instruments they had just used on another patient. In some cases, they would go from dissecting a cadaver & then immediately use the same instruments on a living patient. If you had surgery it was a lottery whether you would live or die.

Let me read from a 1920 *Scientific Monthly* article:

Surgical cleanliness as understood at that time (mid to late 1800s) would astonish a modern observer. In the institutions that had felt the influence of Florence Nightingale, the nurses indeed were fairly neat & esthetically clean. But no such attempt to satisfy the proprieties was made by the surgeon & his assistants. When a dresser or a house surgeon entered upon his term of office, he hunted up an old coat in the lapel of which he probably carried a wisp of ordinary whipcord for tying arteries. This garment did duty for 6 months or a year & was then very properly discarded. There were no such time limits, however, for the surgeons themselves. Their operating coats lasted from year to year & acquired an incrustation of filth of which the owners appeared unconscious or even proud.... Surgeons were not ashamed to speak of a "good old surgical stink." The mortality statistics after amputation gives some indication as to the prevailing conditions. At the Edinburgh Infirmary the death rate was 43%...¹

¹ Paul F. Clark, *Joseph Lister, His Life & Work*, "Scientific Monthly" Dec 1920, pp 524-525

The prevailing theory of that day was that the culprit was the air in the operating rooms. So after an operation they'd open the windows & have the *bad air* leave & hope that *good air* came in. But in reality what was happening was that germs were contaminating the entire operation. Lindsey Fitzharris, author of *The Butchering Art: Joseph Lister's Quest to Transform the Grisly World of Victorian Medicine*, explains the condition of hospitals:

The surgeons wore these aprons that were encrusted with blood. They never changed them. They didn't wash their hands. They didn't wash their instruments. & these operating theaters were filled to the rafters with hundreds of spectators, some of them just curious bypassers who came in with tickets to see the life-and-death struggle play out on the stage. So there was no sense of hygiene. This certainly wasn't a sterile place....²

The surgeon, wearing a blood-encrusted apron, rarely washed his hands or his instruments & carried with him into the theater the unmistakable smell of rotting flesh Operating theaters were gateways to death.

Robert Liston was a famous surgeon in England in the mid-1800s. Here's what's written of him:

It was said of Liston by his colleagues that when he amputated, "the gleam of his knife was followed so instantaneously by the sound of sawing as to make the two actions appear almost simultaneous." His left arm was reportedly so strong that he could use it as a tourniquet, while he wielded the knife in his right hand. This was a feat that required immense strength & dexterity, given that patients often struggled against the fear & agony of the surgeon's assault. Liston could remove a leg in less than 30 seconds, & in order to keep both hands free, he often clasped the bloody knife between his teeth while working.

His most famous (& possibly apocryphal) mishap involved an operation during which he worked so rapidly that he took off 3 of his assistant's fingers & while switching blades, slashed a spectator's coat. Both the assistant & the patient died later of gangrene, & the unfortunate bystander expired on the spot from fright. It is the only surgery in history said to have had a 300% fatality rate.

If all of that wasn't bad enough...

The 2 decades immediately following the popularization of anesthesia saw surgical outcomes worsen. With their newfound confidence about operating without inflicting pain, surgeons became ever more willing to take up the knife, driving up the incidences of postoperative infection & shock. Operating theaters became filthier than ever as the number of surgeries increased. Surgeons still lacking an understanding of the causes of infection would operate on multiple patients in succession using the same unwashed instruments on each occasion. The more crowded the operating theater became, the less likely it was that even the most primitive sanitary precautions would be taken. Of those who went under the knife, many either died or never fully recovered... This problem was universal. Patients worldwide came to further dread the word "hospital..."

It wasn't the environment. It wasn't the building. It wasn't the tools. It wasn't even the surgeon.

None of these were the direct reason why these patients were dying. It was little, invisible things

² Quotes not footnoted are from this book

that were killing surgical patients. There had been theories about germs around for years. In the 1540s it was thought that unseen germs could cause disease. But that theory had never been clearly associated with wounds & surgery until Joseph Lister, who was born April 5, 1827. As a child, he was fascinated by the sciences. While still young he decided he wanted to be a surgeon. After years of study, he became a surgeon but was dismayed at the death rate of his patients. Lister was constantly searching by observation & experiment to find out the cause of the high death rate in all hospitals.

In 1865 Lister learned from the work of Louis Pasteur that putrefaction was a kind of fermentation caused by the growth of microorganisms & that these microorganisms were present in the dust of the air & responsible for wound infection. The enormous significance of the work of Pasteur was immediately apparent to Lister, who had for so many years been struggling with this problem... It was obvious that the prevention of such infections depended upon keeping the ... organisms away from the wound...

Let me read from one of his papers published in 1867:

When it had been shown by the researches of Pasteur that the septic property of the atmosphere depended not on the oxygen or any gaseous constituent, but on minute organisms suspended in it, which owed their energy to their vitality, it occurred to me that decomposition in the injured part might be avoided without excluding the air by applying as a dressing some material capable of destroying the life of the floating particles.³

In his practice, while using sterile procedures on 11 patients, only 1 died following surgery, an almost unheard of success in that day. He had developed a procedure of sterilization which would kill the germs on surgical instruments, doctors' hands, & in the entire room. But his recommendations weren't well received. For one, he was a young doctor trying to teach seasoned surgeons that what they were doing might be killing their patients. To admit that something as simple as washing their hands could have saved lives was apparently too damaging to their pride. They felt as if their whole industry was being questioned. But Joseph Lister was convinced he was on to something. He was convinced that infection of wounds was due to minute living airborne creatures. He recognized that contamination was the vector for infection, realizing the surgeons hands, dressings, & instruments would also be contaminated. Lister confirmed Pasteur's conclusions with his own experiments & used his findings to develop antiseptic techniques for

³ Scientific America, p 527

surgical rooms, doctors, & for wounds. Remember, up until then some 45% to 50% of surgical patients died from infection following surgery. Lister's death rate, after using antiseptic methods, fell to about 15%. Just think about how many lives were saved from that discovery alone. The problem for Lister was that almost no other surgeons believed him.

Joseph Lister is known as the *father of antiseptic surgery* as he is credited with developing procedures & products which treated wounds after surgery which reduced the number of deaths from post-operative infections. While older surgeons weren't convinced, Lister instructed surgeons under his responsibility to wear clean gloves & wash their hands before & after operations with 5% carbolic acid solutions. Instruments were also washed in the same solution & assistants sprayed the solution in the operating theatre. One of his additional suggestions was to stop using porous natural materials in manufacturing the handles of medical instruments. Makes sense to us, right? Not to everyone in his day. His ideas were mocked constantly. A leading medical journal, *The Lancet*, warned the entire medical profession against his ideas. Lister was not popular among the medical field for much of his life. The gradual spread of Lister's teachings & beliefs were slow. The controversy waged & there were those who scoffed, but many younger surgeons under his training began to adopt his methods. Germany was the 1st to adopt his findings while America was among the last. American surgeon Samuel Gross rejected Lister's methodology when Lister visited & lectured at the International Medical Congress in Philadelphia in 1876. Gross is quoted as saying: *Little if any faith is placed by any enlightened or experienced surgeon on this side of the Atlantic in the so-called carbolic acid treatment of Professor Lister.* Another American doctor who attended *accused him of being mentally unhinged & having a "grasshopper in the head."* Eventually, Lister was recognized & respected for his life-saving techniques. Louis Pasteur said Joseph Lister may have been the most important man in modern time when it came to medicine. Just teaching the simple practices of cleanliness & sanitation greatly reduced the deaths. It's been said had he made his discoveries 10 years earlier, & if American doctors would have adopted them, one third of the deaths from the Civil War could have been prevented.

The assassination of President Garfield is a prime example of American doctors rejecting Lister's findings. Lister had visited America only 4 years prior to Garfield's assassination presenting his findings & urging the American medical establishment to adopt his findings & change their treatment practices. Very few listened to him, thinking the sterilizing process was too time-consuming & that it was just too outrageous of an idea that microscopic germs had such an effect upon people. Among the American medical professionals who rejected Lister's methods was Doctor Willard Bliss, (Dr. Doctor Willard Bliss) who observed others treat Abraham Lincoln after he was shot. Bliss took credit as part of the team, even though he wasn't, & his practice grew with this unearned prestige. Unfortunately, he would oversee the treatment of Garfield 15 years later. On July 2, 1881, Bliss was summoned by Robert Todd Lincoln after Garfield had been shot. Bliss was aware of Lister's work but treated the president's gunshot wound with constant probing by unsterilized fingers & instruments. Garfield's personal physician arrived the next day to see Garfield. After a heated exchange, Bliss prevailed, kicked him out, & took over complete control of Garfield's treatment. Throughout the next weeks, Bliss repeatedly probed Garfield's wound with unsterilized fingers & instruments. In a society that had yet to embrace cleanliness as a weapon against disease, Bliss believed, *the dirtier, the better*. Unknown to almost everyone, *Bliss kept exploring for the bullet, making the wound bigger & bigger as he did. & always without anesthetic, keeping Garfield in pain.*⁴ After Garfield's death Bliss conducted the autopsy with 2 other doctors. They cited blood poisoning from the bullet wound as the cause of death, but the facts didn't back up their conclusions. Many, even in that day, thought Bliss was guilty of malpractice but nothing was ever done. Those medical professionals who had adopted Lister's methods were sure the president died needlessly.

What's my point in all of this? While one application of this story to Scripture would have to do with sin & purity, a few statements got me thinking in a different direction. Let me read them:

Lister's *teaching was spread by his own students as they passed out to new fields of endeavor.*⁵

⁴ Fred Rosen, *Murdering the President*

⁵ *Scientific America*, p 529

His students saw with their own eyes the antiseptic system working every time they accompanied him onto the wards. If seeing was believing, Lister was creating a group of disciples: men who would graduate & spread his ideas...

He was confident that it would be safe in the hands of his disciples, who would now be entrusted with implementing his antiseptic system throughout the hospital.

There was no doubt that Lister's mission was both evangelical & apostolic...⁶

See any similarities to Lister & his disciples & Jesus & His disciples? Lister's work saved lives physically. Jesus' work saves lives eternally. & both used disciples to accomplish their mission. So, what is a *disciple*? 40+ years ago I had a professor in college by the name of Mark Bailey. One of the classes I took from him was on being a disciple. He boiled down the characteristics of a disciple to 7 things.⁷ If you search the internet, you'll find lists of characteristics ranging from 3 to 300. We won't be looking at all the characteristics of a disciple today, but I just want to remind you of the basics. As we all know, a Christian is a follower of Christ. That means we follow His example & His teaching. We want to be like Him. A disciple of Jesus looks like Jesus. Regardless of the time, the place, or the person, when a person is a disciple of Jesus, they become more like Him. In Mk 3:14 we read that Jesus called His disciples so that they **might be with Him**. For 3½ years the disciples were under the instruction of the greatest Teacher the world has ever known. By personal contact & association, Jesus trained them for His service. Day after day they walked & talked with Him. On His journeys He took them with Him so they might see how He lived & taught. Jesus was an example for His disciples. He didn't just speak publicly, He gave His disciples the possibility to observe His life & service. He didn't just preach but also lived His message. Charles Spurgeon preached a sermon on August 1, 1875 titled, *The Choice of a Leader*. In this sermon, he said this:

We are overpowered by the grandeur of the Redeemer's goodness, by the splendour of His love, the infinity of His self-sacrifice. Jesus commands our faith by the revelation of Himself, & by that same manifestation He conforms us to Himself. Was ever such a life as His? Was ever such a death? Was ever such an altogether lovely person as His? Was ever such perfection as His? In life He was so outspoken & yet so gentle, so courageous & yet so kind, so unflinching & yet so tender, wearing His heart upon His sleeve in the transparency of truth, but prudent & guarding Himself with infallible wisdom; a match for all, however they might assail Him, & yet apparently never on His guard at all, but as a child among them, the holy child Jesus. Oh, if you sit at Jesus' feet you

⁶ Louis, Fu Kuo-Tai (6/21). "Great Names in the History of Orthopaedics XIV: Joseph Lister (1827–1912) Part 2". *Journal of Orthopaedics, Trauma & Rehabilitation*.

⁷ See his book, *To Follow Him: The Seven Marks of a Disciple*.

*will not only learn of Him & His teaching will have power over you, but you will learn Him, for He Himself is His own best lesson.*⁸

Jesus called His disciples to follow Him unconditionally. When Jesus decided to spend the majority of His time concentrating on the 12 disciples, it didn't mean He didn't care about the masses of people. On the contrary, He invested so much time & energy in the 12 because He wanted to reach the masses. Jesus understood the principle of multiplication. He knew He needed to train His disciples well so that they could in turn make disciples of others & those disciples could make disciples of others. Jesus knew that His training wouldn't be complete without giving His disciples practical experience in reaching people for the kingdom of God. Therefore, He sent them out. Before He ascended to heaven, He gave them the Great Commission in which He commanded them to make disciples of others. Discipleship is never complete without reaching out to others & making disciples of them.

Today, over 2,000 years since Jesus lived, the characteristics of the original disciples should be true of us today. The marks of a disciple of Christ shouldn't look any different today than they did centuries ago. Lk 6:40 tells us, **A pupil (literally, *disciple*) is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher.** A **fully trained** disciple isn't difficult to identify. He looks like his teacher. A disciple of Jesus ought to have the same characteristics as Jesus. As a result of spending time with Jesus, the disciples demonstrated the characteristics of a disciple. Joseph Lister, whether he knew it or not, did the same thing. He showed his disciples his methods. He taught them his methods. He had them practice his methods. & he sent them out to use his methods & to teach & train others to do the same.

We are all called by God to be disciples of Jesus. So a basic question is, *What is a disciple of Jesus?* A simple definition is this: *A disciple of Jesus is someone who is following Jesus, being changed by Jesus, & is committed to the mission of Jesus.*⁹ A disciple is simply someone who adheres to the teachings of another. It's a follower or a learner. It's someone who takes up the ways of someone else. Applied to Jesus, a disciple is someone who learns from Him to live like Him. Or, you might

⁸ www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-choice-of-a-leader/

⁹ Discipleship.org

say disciples of Jesus are *little Christs*. As we saw, the word for *disciple* in the Greek means *learner*, *student*, or *follower*. Think of it as an internship where an expert mentors a student toward competency in a trade or skill. This relationship involves head knowledge but focuses upon applying that knowledge to everyday situations of life to equip the learner with wisdom. The hope is that the apprentice, the disciple, will be the master-teacher of others in years to come.

As Christians, when Jesus speaks we listen, right? Jesus is the One to whom all authority in heaven & earth has been given (Mt 28:18). He's the One of whom it will be forever said, **Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power & riches & wisdom & might & honor & glory & blessing** (Rev 5:12). He's the One to whom every knee will bow (Phil 2:10) & from whom the fury of God's wrath will be executed (Rev 19:15). Therefore, what He says matters. Beyond that, we've been united to Jesus by faith (Rom 6:5), made alive in Him by grace (Eph 2:4-5), & counted righteous in Him because of His work (Gal 2:16). Jesus, in all of His supremacy, is also our Shepherd & we know His voice (Jn 10:27). When He speaks, we listen. That's what disciples do. Mk 1:17 is helpful to see what it means to be a disciple. **Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, & I will make you become fishers of men."** Notice 3 key characteristics of a disciple in this verse. A disciple *follows* Jesus, is being *changed* by Jesus, & is committed to *the mission* of Jesus.

1. Following Jesus A disciple is simply someone who follows Jesus. Read through the NT & you'll find the word *Christian* used only 3 times. Look for the word *disciple*, though, & it shows up almost 300x. This means the English word *disciple* shows up 100x more often than the word *Christian*. A Christian, a disciple of Jesus is someone whose goal it is to learn to think & act & react just like Jesus. If you're a disciple, that's your life's purpose, to become more & more Christ-like. This is what Paul is talking about when he says,

Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing I *do*: forgetting what *lies* behind & reaching forward to what *lies* ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:12-14).

Being a disciple of Jesus isn't about arriving, it's about progressing. It's a consistent step-by-step, forward motion toward our goal that continues throughout our lives. How do we today follow

Jesus? Jn 8:31-32 tells us, **Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; & you will know the truth, & the truth will make you free."** If we're going to follow Jesus we must **continue in His word**. We must be students of the Bible. We're going to immerse ourselves in it & study it, not just once but regularly, frequently, & devotedly. We do this not just for head knowledge. That's never enough. We must practice it & obey it. Are you a disciple of Jesus? If so, you'll be continuing in His Word. If we abide in His Word, then we are His disciples. We must commit to follow Him by heeding what He says. Reading & studying His Word is part of our responsibility if we're to follow Him. How would you describe your desire & discipline to follow Jesus & be His disciple? Are you regularly in His Word, learning from Him? Are you more like Jesus today than you were a year ago? If not, why not?

2. Being Changed by Jesus. As we follow Jesus, we change. The NT promises that, as we pursue God's glory, the Holy Spirit transforms us into His image (2 Cor 3:18). We grow & mature & become more Christ-like. When Jesus told Peter & Andrew, **Follow Me & I will make you become...** (Mk 1:17), He was promising transformation. & as we read the disciples' stories, that's precisely what we see. Was Peter changed by Jesus? You better believe it! Jesus called John one of the **Sons of Thunder** (Mk 3:17). He & his brother James wanted to call down fire from heaven & destroy a group of Samaritans who weren't receptive to Jesus (Lk 9:54). Jesus saw the brothers needed more training from Him & pulled them closer & gave it to them. Amazingly, by the end of his life, John was known not as a **Son of Thunder**, but as the *Apostle of Love*, having referenced love in his gospel & 1st letter (1 Jn) more than any other NT writer. The world tells us, *People don't change*, & although that may be true, when people follow Jesus, Jesus changes them. Part of that change is to deny ourselves. Mk 8:34 says that Jesus **summoned the crowd with His disciples, & said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, & take up his cross & follow Me."** God's Word is given to us to change us. One of the changes it tells us we need to make is to deny ourselves. What's that mean? It means to say *NO* to yourself. We're to renounce ourselves as the ultimate authority & focus of our lives. Instead, we're to focus on Jesus as our Lord who has all authority over us. He's the One in charge. He is the Head over all. Maybe that seems too extreme. But to be His disciples

we must deny ourselves & submit to His authority. In other words, we can't do what we please & hold ourselves up as Jesus' disciples. It's only with His help & His Helper, the Holy Spirit who indwells us, that we can deny ourselves. Are you being transformed & changed? Are you becoming more like Jesus?

3. Joining Jesus' mission. The change Jesus works into our lives leads us to model our lives after Him, which includes our commitment to join Him & fish for people. **Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, & I will make you become fishers of men."** A disciple of Jesus looks like Jesus. Why did Jesus come? One reason is given in Mk 10:45. **The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve...** When we're truly a disciple of Jesus we become more like Him. In this, we learn to make disciples as Jesus made disciples. After all, if we obey everything Jesus commanded, that means we too will learn to duplicate the process by which we became His disciples. To be a mature disciple of Jesus is to become a disciple maker like Jesus as well. It's a natural process: we follow Jesus, we're changed by Jesus, & as we follow the One who spent of His time making disciples, we too commit to make disciples as He did. Loving people as Jesus loved people means we want to see people come to faith in Jesus & embrace His rule in their lives (Jn 13:34). Because we love people & want God's best for them, we want to help them become disciples & grow as disciples.

With our definition of a disciple in mind, with its 3 elements, 1) Follow Jesus, 2) Transformed by Jesus, & 3) Joining Jesus in His mission, a follow-up question is in order. Every one of us should ponder the question, *Am I a disciple of Jesus?* Answering this question calls for more deliberation than, *do I go to church?* or, *when was I saved?* Whether or not you're a disciple of Jesus has strong implications for how you live today.

Are you a disciple of Jesus? Do you have the basic characteristics of a disciple? Are you following Jesus today? Are you being changed today? Are you obedient to His command to make other disciples today?