

## Repentance Leads To Christ-like Character

### The Sin of Claiming To Belong To Our Lord Jesus Without A Burden For The Lost

*“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore, as you’re going make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”* (Matthew 28:18-20; see also 2 Corinthians 5:14-21).

*“[God] has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us”* (2 Corinthians 5:19,20).

Years ago missiologists stated that “the church in the United States hasn’t grown since 1977.” More were leaving religious institutions than were joining; fewer were even entering in the first place. Something has seriously gone missing within contemporary Christendom. We believe that essential missing element is our *Lord Jesus, Himself!*

So few gospel presentations today point to the utter depravity of humanity. And because of that sinful rebellion, we are eternally separated from a holy and just God *apart from* the ONLY Way, Truth and Life, Jesus. The covenant reality of His life having been sacrificed as the *only* acceptable substitute for the condemnation our sins deserve merits barely a nod among too many who claim to be Christian.

Most false gospels stress mere intellectual agreement with certain Bible passages, then ask something like this:

“Don’t you want to be forgiven and spend eternity in heaven? Then just agree that Jesus died for you and you’re in!” Yet false gospels so often ignore the biblical requirement of *repentance*—turning away from sin in order to become a new creation in Jesus, loving and serving Him as Lord and Master of your very life.

The true Gospel creates an entirely unique, life-changing response in your *heart and soul*—a response that goes far beyond concurring with a set of biblical concepts that seem desirable.

Remember, every person on earth stands *condemned to hell* apart from their covering in Christ’s blood alone (John 3:18). That means our eternal destiny *apart from* a love-grounded, obedient trust in Jesus is the hell about which He warned so often (e.g., Matthew 10:28).

*If* you truly realize and abhor your own sinful depravity (your whole *sin-bent propensity*, never mind particular bad attitudes and actions), then you can’t help but be overwhelmed by a grateful heart of love for Jesus. Fleeing your sin and running to Him unstoppably consumes you! Jesus did on your behalf what you couldn’t do for yourself. He alone was THE perfect, sinless Sacrifice Who took the punishment you deserved so you could live for *His* purposes—doing the will of our Father—the rest of your life on earth and then abide with Him forever. That’s the message of *reconciliation with the Father* which Paul so earnestly proclaims.

That’s the response of someone who’s authentically grasped the significance of the cross and the One Who has shown such love, a love that’s manifested by the presence of His indwelling Spirit. And filled with that Spirit of love, *you desperately want others to know* that He alone delivers from sin’s hellish consequence, and that through His Spirit your life is transformed as you follow Him as

your beloved King. *Your testimonies* bring to life His love and His power for those who have ears to hear—those who ask for the reason for the wonderful hope you have in Christ as Lord of your life (1Peter 3:15).

**If** in your heart, however, you feel that you're a "good person", or that all "good people" get to heaven, or that compared to a lot of others you deserve eternal life, then you've been duped by the demonic god of this age (2Corinthians 4:4). You've swallowed lies that keep you from knowing, loving and serving Jesus as Lord of your life. Therefore you have neither motive nor joy in revealing to others their *need* for life in Him.

These are the biblical distinctions by which you must test yourself:

- **Do you truly understand *why* Jesus died on the cross for you?**
- **Do you recognize in your heart your sinful condition in the sight of God from the day you were born until you are born again?**
- **Is your own heart readily moved to tell people you know about what Jesus has done and will do for them if they wholeheartedly repent and turn to Him in obedient trust?**

If that last question seems foreign to you, or you're reluctant to even gratefully serve as Christ's ambassador, then it's very possible you received a false gospel. That means you're on the outside of His kingdom, looking in, because His Spirit isn't abiding in you. And, "*if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ*" (Romans 8:9).

Don't take this lightly. If you don't *delight* in being a vessel through whom our Father makes His appeal to the lost, then you need to revisit His Word. You've missed something essential in both your understanding of your own sin nature and of what Jesus did so that you might be saved from your sin's just penalty. You

need to be convicted in your own heart by the truth if you're to find joy in discipling others who come to His fold as beloved and obedient sheep!

Mike: In the 1980s while I was counseling church leaders, one group came to me for guidance. They had given their congregation a spiritual gifts survey to help both the individuals and the leadership discover their gifting. The problem was, they'd distributed the survey over 3 weeks earlier and fewer than 20% had turned it back in. No matter how much they were reminded, no one else responded.

I recommended they take the membership roll of their congregation and prayerfully put an "X" next to the names of any about whose salvation the leaders had doubts. What a surprise as the leaders discovered they doubted the authenticity of faith in 80% of the people! And these were the very ones who hadn't filled out the spiritual gifts survey. I asked, "How can people who *don't* have the Spirit of Jesus abiding in them fill out a questionnaire about spiritual anointing they *don't have*?"

This same principle holds true for people who *call* themselves "Christian" but aren't burdened for those who have yet to trust in Jesus. **They may not have within them the Spirit of Jesus.** If you have experienced spiritual rebirth, His Spirit *does* abide in you—and He wants to use you as an ambassador and discipler. From a scriptural standpoint of love-grounded obedience to your Lord, this isn't optional. Rather, it's a loving responsibility and privilege filled with joy.

By shrinking away from testifying of Jesus and coming alongside to disciple people in His ways, you are sinning. Ask yourself *why* you're shirking, because God wants you to know (since He's already aware and isn't pleased)! Your

reluctant silence not only prevents any unbelievers you encounter from hearing testimony of the Living God. You're also willfully refusing to be identified with our Lord Jesus.

Your shame to be known as one of His is like disowning Him before others, a denial that carries a heavy cost: "*Whoever disowns Me before men, I will disown him before My Father in heaven*" (Matthew 10: 33). If this describes you, please repent. Earnestly ask His Spirit for opportunities to bear witness of His intervention and love, and be willing to disciple those He brings to you for that express purpose.

Unlike nominal "Christians" who blend into society, we who belong to our Lord Jesus must stand up and be identified with Him. The Spirit of our Lord is within us bearing witness to His presence (1John 4:13,14). Just as a woman who is well along in her pregnancy is identifiable by the unseen baby she's carrying, even more so must we with the Spirit within us identify ourselves as His own vessels.

### **The Relational Nature of True Discipleship**

Let's look at the *relational context* of discipleship cited by Paul with those he came alongside to train in Thessalonika. Pay special attention to the phrases that make plain his intimate relationship with them, and how that love was enacted:

*"We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also*

*with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.*

*We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into His kingdom and glory" (1Thessalonians 1:2-7; 2:8,11,12).*

There's a wealth of meat in these passages for us today to digest in our own discipling relationships. Paul's relational intimacy with these followers of Jesus confirms His confidence that his discipling has been effective among them. Think about the *relational commitment* between Jesus and His disciples, which is the foundation of true discipleship.

When Paul disciplined Jesus followers in the various areas he journeyed to, he spent meaningful and substantial time with the members of each faith community. In this way he was also role modeling for Timothy, Titus, Silas and others the importance of *personally caring* for those they were training to grow in Christ's character. A *relational pattern* was set for subsequent generations in the faith who would then disciple others.

What a difference from today's classroom environment which teaches "discipleship methods" from an academic, non-relational approach. A *technique* becomes the model, so those to be "disciplined" are targets of instruction, individu-

als to whom information is transmitted.

However, authentic discipleship as we've discussed is based on relationship, a true regard and care for the person you're discipling. Your own love-grounded walk with Jesus as your Lord is on the line as an example for those you're discipling to follow (1Timothy 4:12). Anything else would be hypocrisy. Paul proclaimed the essential value of *role modeling* what you teach:

- *“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ”* (1Corinthians 11:1);
- *“Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you”* (Philippians 3:17).

If you've been around nominal Christianity for long, you may be reluctant to make disciples. You're anxious that you don't know enough about the Bible, or worry that you can't express yourself clearly enough so others don't turn away confused. You may be concerned that someone will ask you something you can't answer. But don't get trapped by an *intimidation* factor introduced by Hellenism into Christianity: **A head full of Bible knowledge is NOT what qualifies you to disciple others.**

- If you belong to Jesus, you have *His sanctifying Spirit within you* to proclaim Truth in love.
- You have experiences to share about *how He's changed you* since He chose you out of the world's ways into Kingdom living.
- You have *testimonies of spiritual power encounters* and divine intervention in your time of need that only God could do.
- You have *biblical applications to discuss* that have molded your character as you've loved Jesus and walked in obedient trust.

These are powerful testimonies pointing to the all-sufficiency of our Lord which you've experienced, to His absolute faithfulness to keep promises, and to the unfailing wisdom of God's Word. No one can take these away from you! And as you bear witness and love others as Jesus does, those you talk with may turn away from sin to Him as well and use you as their discipling model. It begins with each person realizing their own sinful depravity and their own need for the shed blood of Jesus as full payment for the punishment they deserve.

No authentic follower of Jesus ever gets to the place in which they're completely competent to represent our Lord in His purity and sinlessness. Rather, our lives are a pilgrimage of ups and downs, victory and defeat, sin and repentance—realities of the Christian walk which others need to see. A person who follows Jesus as their Lord in Spirit and in truth has no pious airs, no sense of superiority that makes them seem more spiritual than they really are inside.

Actually, when you realize the wonder that He has chosen you with all your shortcomings and perceived inadequacies to house the Spirit of Christ, you probably want to fall on your face in humble adoration before Him!

*“For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us”* (2Corinthians 4:5,7).

Much of nominal Christendom is content with *teaching at* people who sit together in polite silence to listen. Sadly, few sense any relational responsibility to *do anything* with what they hear. But discipleship as patterned by Jesus, however,



is very much a *heart and spirit* endeavor. A profound sense of mutual accountability links the discipler and one being disciplined. Think about the differences between the two approaches as you examine this comparison drawn by noted author Joel C. Rosenberg in *The Invested Life*:

- A teacher shares information.  
*A discipler shares his life.*
- A teacher aims for the head.  
*A discipler aims for the heart.*
- A teacher measures knowledge.  
*A discipler measures faith.*
- A teacher is an authority.  
*A discipler is a servant.*
- A teacher says, "Listen to me."  
*A discipler says, "Follow me."*

Discipleship flows out of the *love-grounded relationship* we have with Jesus. We're not representing a concept about Him, but *our Lord Himself*. The Person of our Lord and His redemptive love must be our foremost consideration rather than spouting forth disconnected Bible verses to try to hook a convert.

One particular aspect of encountering Jesus as your Lord and of being transformed into His character by His Spirit grates many in this pleasure-oriented, self-absorbed culture: *suffering*. Painful challenges and circumstances drive you to that place of humility in which you hate your sin and willingly turn from it in order to find loving reconciliation with our Father. And suffering often catalyzes growth in Christ's likeness.

To authentically follow Jesus isn't intended to make your life easier. Rather, He purposes to make you *holy*. You'll encounter repeated discomfort and inconvenience as you serve Him as His ambassador. For the glorious goal set before you, be assured that you *will* suffer:

- "*The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, **if indeed we share in His sufferings** in order that we may also share in His glory*" (Romans 8:16,17);
- "*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to trust in Him, but **also to suffer for Him**, since you are going through **the same struggle** you saw I had, and now hear that I still have*" (Philippians 1:29,30).
- "*To this you were called, because **Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps***" (1Peter 2:21).

All too often seminaries accentuate Bible knowledge as the focus of preparing church leaders. The biblical qualification of *suffering* which would develop compassion and identification with those they'll be serving is rarely if ever mentioned. Yet this neglect does great injustice to our Lord's way of making disciples. Personally embracing the suffering of others and extending yourself to come alongside the hurting with compassionate comfort is often preceded by your *own* experience of suffering that's been undergirded by His sustaining power:

*"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, Who **comforts us in all our troubles**, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with **the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows**"* (2Corinthians 1:3-5).

Those who are spiritually lost are hurting and need to hear and experience the comfort our Lord Jesus has given you. Your testimony makes Him real to others.

*“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”*  
(1John 4:16,17).

What an amazing image of relational intimacy the apostle who was especially close to Jesus pictures here: *“Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.”* Through this intimate union we are called to represent by our very lives the One Who abides in us. We’ve been called out of ungodly ways and values for a purpose: *“in this world we are like Him.”* Living in the love of God and being like Jesus to everyone around us must increasingly be the central identity of our Father’s children—a blessed privilege indeed!

Love summarizes the reason to eagerly obey the commands and laws our Lord has presented in both the Older and Newer Testaments. Each is an expression of self-sacrificing love.

*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’”* (Luke 10:27).

Love for Jesus as our Lord, for those who are family in Him, and for those who have yet to respond to His gracious gift of life drives the earnest desire to obey Jesus and disciple our “neighbors”, whoever they are and wherever we find them. Isn’t this the crux of the Great Commission?

*“Therefore [as you go] disciple ... teaching them to obey”* (Matthew 28:19,20).

Putting into practice the **Greatest Commandment** and the **Great Com-**

**mission**, and discipling others to do likewise, is confirmation for you that the Spirit of Jesus abides within you. However, we’ve observed that those who have no desire to either bring others to Him or to help them grow as His disciples may be questioning their own salvation or hiding out complacently in self-serving nominal Christianity. Which describes you?

*“Who do people say I am?”*  
(Mark 8:27).

Our Lord Jesus often used questions to get people to reveal their heart motives (see also Matthew 21:23-27). Asking questions of others is a significant Hebraic method of discipling them. Consider these verses that intertwine the heart with motives and words:

*“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks”* (Luke 6:45).

*“But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned”* (Matthew 12:36,37).

*“Their tongue is a deadly arrow; it speaks with deceit. With his mouth each speaks cordially to his neighbor, but in his heart he sets a trap for him”* (Jeremiah 9:8).

A person who is being discipled needs to recognize the very real connection between what motivates his heart and what he says. For instance, someone may sound “spiritual” in what they’re saying, but they’re really only trying to make you think they agree with you. Their heart and their words aren’t lining up. But you

could more readily discern any disparity by *asking appropriate questions* that would reveal their heart motives.

There's a key difference to note. *Hellenism* relies primarily on *teaching at* people with the purpose of conveying information. Hence Hellenist-influenced teachers use sentences that end in periods(.) and exclamation points(!). They make statements that invite no feedback or discussion. The *Hebraic* approach uses questions(?) to invite revelation of heart and mind, thereby enabling the discipler to better understand the learner personally.

Statements that end with a period are like casting a stone at a disciple, and those ending with an exclamation point like throwing a spear at the individual.



But a question is like a shepherd's staff. As a shepherd uses the staff to grab a sheep and draw it closer, a question brings the disciple closer to conviction as he hears himself reply with an answer. Then, in the light of God's Word, he can judge for himself how he may have sinned against a holy God.

God's Word never changes. It's God-breathed, and is useful for all aspects of correction and rebuke and training in righteousness so that what we do aligns with what we say. As such, it is set apart from any other text or religious writing:

*“For the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart”* (Hebrews 4:12).

You aren't called as a discipler to sit in judgment of the person you're discipling. Rather, Jesus has called His own to be redemptive in their love and correction as He is: *“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance”* (Luke 5:32). Being judgmental doesn't help your purpose.

For too long Hellenized Christianity has preached *at* the downtrodden with statements which leave no room for inquiry. But as you reach out to those who are emotionally suffering, whether believer or not, *questions* more than statements help them to turn to our Lord Jesus for the healing they need. If you want to be redemptive in helping them, you need to realize they're imprisoned by past or current events and start there.

While the painful event or circumstance perhaps can't be changed, the *thoughts* and *feelings* in response to it can be, and the person can find healing in Christ. When someone is encouraged through appropriate questions, he or she may recognize the unChrist-likeness of their response and turn to our Lord for forgiveness and healing. When questions are answered and discussed in light of Jesus and His Word, it's amazing how His Spirit can heal emotions. This is where your authentic care comes in. They must be willing to trust Christ in you, and you need to earn that trust as His loving ambassador.

Help the one you're discipling and avert a judgmental spirit by asking questions rather than making statements. As they hear their own answers, you open their heart to be convicted by the Spirit and the Word. Don't throw stones or spears. There's great potential and power for healing by asking questions.