

# Deepening Discipleship

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**M**y dear brothers and sisters, it is indeed an honor to speak to you today. As a young boy I watched basketball games played at the Marriott Center and often dreamed of suiting up and running out onto that storied floor. Sadly, my basketball skills never elevated to the level needed for such an opportunity, so predictably that dream faded and then died.

You can imagine my excitement several months ago when I received the assignment to speak at this devotional. While I knew that I would be “suited up” in a different way than I had once imagined and that I likely would stroll and not run out onto the floor, at least I would be in the dreamed-of location.

Alas, that brief dream also evaporated under current conditions, and so I come to you from a small, empty auditorium located on the ground floor of the Church Office Building. Nevertheless, I am humbled by this opportunity to speak to you and recognize your goodness, your academic achievements, your honor and integrity, and your so very bright futures.

## **Learners Walking the Path of Discipleship**

How can one speak at a BYU devotional in December and not focus on our Savior, Jesus Christ? He must be our focus not just in December but throughout every month, every week, and every day. Indeed, He will be the focus of my remarks as we explore what it means to be His disciples and what we can do to deepen our discipleship.

The Bible Dictionary defines a *disciple* as “a pupil or learner,” explaining that the term also refers to “all followers of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup> Other dictionaries also add to this explanation, helping us to understand that a disciple is one who is under the care of a teacher. I like that concept. I like the thought of being under the care of Jesus Christ. You might note that the definition of *disciple* requires action by those desiring to be so defined. For example, a pupil, by definition, is a student who is enrolled, who is engaged, and who carries a certain status.

Similarly, *learner* is not a passive designation or role. A learner is someone who is still, frankly, learning—someone who has not yet arrived at full

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knowledge and understanding but who recognizes that additional effort is required to gain the desired knowledge. Important for all of us to understand is that a learner is *someone who still has questions that are unanswered yet hopes to find answers as he or she continues to learn*. Sadly, some desire all answers without expending the required patience, effort, and diligence. When they don't have the answers or understanding of some of life's questions, they fall into what some call a crisis of faith.

However, as a friend once told me, the path of discipleship is not a linear path stretching in a straight line from point A to point B. Rather, the path of discipleship has both its high and low points. Instead of seeing the low points as crises, we can instead consider them as part of the journey that we all must travel. Even the original twelve disciples had their high and low moments—moments that were part of their journey. However, that journey solidified their discipleship as they continued as learners under the care of their Master Teacher.

From these definitions and examples—and the reality of the ups and downs we personally experience as we are tried and tested on the road of discipleship—we see that a disciple of Jesus Christ must be actively engaged, patient in the process, sufficiently humble, dedicated to the Savior, and filled with faith that the Master Teacher is leading us in the right direction.

As we walk the path of discipleship, it is important to remember that disciples are to learn as God intended, “line upon line, precept upon precept; and [that He] will try you and prove you here-with.”<sup>2</sup> No one ever said that discipleship would be an easy or brief journey with no obstacles. If it were, there would be little growth or development of the disciple.

While a disciple is undergoing that development, the most important thing he or she can do is to continue on the path of discipleship rather than leave the care of the teacher. Leaving the care of the Master Teacher renders us vulnerable to the philosophies of men and of those who teach:

*Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify in committing a little sin; yea, lie a little,*

*take the advantage of one because of his words, dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this; and do all these things, for tomorrow we die.*<sup>3</sup>

Of such, Nephi warned:

*There shall be many which shall teach after this manner, false and vain and foolish doctrines, and shall be puffed up in their hearts, and shall seek deep to hide their counsels from the Lord; and their works shall be in the dark.*<sup>4</sup>

My dear brothers and sisters, we cannot afford to leave the path of discipleship; we cannot afford to leave the care of our Teacher. We learn from the Gospel of John that

*many of his disciples [meaning His followers, not the Twelve] went back, and walked no more with him.*

*Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?*

*Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.*

*And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.*<sup>5</sup>

The question that Jesus asked His twelve disciples here is a good one to ask ourselves. In your low moments, “will ye also go away?” When you don't yet have the answers you seek, when your friends or even your family have chosen to leave Him, and when a doubt—whether it be historical, doctrinal, social, or otherwise—enters your mind, will you also go away?

And what of the question Simon Peter asked the Lord: “To whom shall we go?” To whom will you go if you leave? Will you go to those who mock sacred things, who ridicule the prophets, or who hurl their digital stones and arrows at those who sound the warning voice? Will you go to the charismatic, the disaffected, the dissident, or those seeking company as they wallow in their own inward misery?

These are powerful and eternally significant questions. How will you answer them, if they come? There are many who would offer to help you off the path in your low moments. Most often they are seeking to validate their own decisions to

leave the path because misery does, in fact, often love company.

In contrast, Jesus is our example in all things, including staying on the path. He lived a perfect life. He showed us the perfect example of what a disciple is and how a disciple acts. Was not Jesus a disciple of His Father? Was He a pupil? Was He a learner? Was He under the care of a teacher? Clearly, the answer to all of these questions is a resounding yes!

The scriptures teach us that Jesus “received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness.”<sup>6</sup> We also learn that

*Jesus grew up with his brethren, and waxed strong, and waited upon the Lord for the time of his ministry to come.*

*And he served under his father [Joseph], and he spake not as other men, neither could he be taught; for he needed not that any **man** should teach him.*<sup>7</sup>

It is significant to note that Jesus did not need to be taught by men; He was under the care of His Heavenly Father, the only one who could be a teacher to the Son of God. Jesus was a pupil and learner under God’s tutelage. Perhaps another title that He can be known by is the Great Disciple.

### **Willing to Let God Prevail in Our Lives**

Let’s explore His discipleship just a bit more. Some of the first recorded words spoken by Jesus Christ chronologically were actually spoken in the Council in Heaven, when He said, “Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever.”<sup>8</sup> The last words of His mortal life were uttered while He was affixed to the cross: “It is finished.”<sup>9</sup>

From those words in the premortal life to His last words in mortality, Jesus, the Savior of all humankind, was the consummate disciple of His Father. It wasn’t His own will but the Father’s to which He submitted Himself.

We see that manifest multiple times in the scriptures. Early on, a Book of Mormon prophet prophesied of Jesus: “Even so he shall be led, crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father.”<sup>10</sup> And then later we

read of the fulfillment of that prophecy when He descended from the heavens onto the steps of the temple in Bountiful. There He announced:

*Behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered **the will of the Father** in all things from the beginning.*<sup>11</sup>

The principles of discipleship and of submitting one’s own will seem to be important companions. When the scriptures speak of “will,” our minds turn to the doctrine of agency. “Agency is the ability and privilege God gives us to choose and to act for ourselves.”<sup>12</sup> The scriptures teach us that

*men [and women] are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.*<sup>13</sup>

Our will, or agency, is truly ours to do with as we choose. It is a gift from a loving Heavenly Father, and He honors that gift. In the Council in Heaven, He allowed us to choose His plan, as advocated by His Firstborn in the spirit and Only Begotten Son in the flesh, or to choose to follow Lucifer, who rebelled against the Father and His plan.<sup>14</sup> A significant difference between these two choices hinged upon agency. Under the Father’s plan, agency would be honored. In contrast, choosing to follow Lucifer would violate the doctrine of agency. In one of the great ironies of all time, God allowed all, even those who didn’t want agency in their mortal lives, to exercise their agency in this Grand Council, thereby forever removing themselves, by their own choice, from the presence of the Father and the Son. The fact that our Heavenly Father allowed one-third of His children to make this choice powerfully reinforces how He honors this gift.<sup>15</sup> It is ours to do with as we choose, albeit not without resultant consequences.

With that understanding, we can more deeply understand the significance of the message

recently given to us by our beloved prophet, President Russell M. Nelson. President Nelson taught us a powerful concept that he too had just learned. It was regarding an additional and significant meaning of the name *Israel*. You will remember that he taught:

*With the help of two Hebrew scholars, I learned that one of the Hebraic meanings of the word Israel is “let God prevail.” Thus the very name of Israel refers to a person who is willing to let God prevail in his or her life.<sup>16</sup>*

The connection to our topic today is that in order to deepen our discipleship, we must be willing to let God prevail more fully in our lives. As Jesus teaches us so poignantly through His own discipleship to the Father, we must each exercise our agency and subordinate our will to the will of the Master Teacher. This is a sign of a true disciple.

So how do we let God prevail? How do we submit our will to His? How do we deepen our discipleship? This Christmas season, I encourage you to give a gift to your Master Teacher—the gift of increased effort to allow God to prevail in your life and thereby to deepen your discipleship to Him. Each of the following five steps will require that you give Him the only thing that is truly yours to give—your will.

### 1. Obedience

First, obedience. The scriptures teach us, “He that receiveth my law and doeth it, the same is my disciple.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, without obedience to the Teacher, we cannot be His disciples.

When we think of obedience, perhaps we err in focusing only on the “big” commandments, which are certainly necessary and should, frankly, be largely automatic for us. However, to deepen our discipleship, we need to consider and be mindful of those commandments that are truly character shaping and that bring us closer to the Master Teacher. For example, the commandment to “love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you”<sup>18</sup> is filled with discipleship-deepening direction.

Given that this is a BYU devotional, another example is the Honor Code, which is not a

commandment of God but is a commitment that each of you have made. Whether you fully understand the reasons behind elements of the Honor Code is less an issue than being a man or woman of your word. You committed to live by the Honor Code as a condition of enrollment. Personal integrity, demonstrated by being a man or woman of your word, is an important element of the law of obedience and is a means of deepening your discipleship.

### 2. Endurance

Second, endurance. The Savior taught, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples.”<sup>19</sup> Discipleship requires not only an understanding of the teachings of the Master but also perseverance and endurance as you walk the path of discipleship. You will remember that the doctrine of Christ includes the essential element of enduring to the end.<sup>20</sup>

Years ago, when I was a young bishop, I marveled at the fact that a couple desiring to be sealed would, after that sealing, have completed all of the necessary ordinances to return to God.<sup>21</sup> This was accomplished often at a relatively young age. The remaining requirement for them was to endure to the end. So it seems that enduring is not an afterthought to the ordinances of the covenant path; it is the work of a lifetime.

We endure as we keep the covenants we have made with God. This includes continuing to exercise faith in Jesus Christ, repenting daily, always being worthy to hold and then holding a current temple recommend, accepting and fulfilling callings and assignments, continuing in our own personal worship, and joining in public devotion.

### 3. Remember Those in Need

Third, remember those in need. We learn in the scriptures that we are to “remember in all things the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted, for he that doeth not these things, the same is not my disciple.”<sup>22</sup>

In the new *General Handbook* of the Church, we learn that “as we come unto Christ and help others do the same, we participate in God’s work of salvation and exaltation. . . . The work of salvation and exaltation focuses on four divinely appointed

responsibilities,” one of which is “caring for those in need.”<sup>23</sup>

You will remember that King Benjamin gave a powerful discourse to his people and, ultimately, to us on the importance of caring for those in need. He taught:

*Ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish.*<sup>24</sup>

He reminded us that we are “all beggars”<sup>25</sup> and that we all call on the Lord “for a remission of [our] sins.”<sup>26</sup> I love his final words on the matter, when he taught:

*I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants.*<sup>27</sup>

At present, many of you may feel that you are one of those in need. I remember my own days as a struggling student. I remember thinking as my wife and I went grocery shopping that we couldn’t afford flavor. The bland and flavorless seemed more within our budget. We did our best but struggled to make ends meet. I remember a studio apartment we lived in that was so small I could answer the door, open the refrigerator, and flush the toilet, all without leaving our double bed.

However, even as you struggle through school, you can help to ease the burdens of others through service and sacrifice. Your contributions may be small, but remember the poor widow, observed by Jesus, who “threw in two mites, which make a farthing. . . . For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living.”<sup>28</sup>

It is not the amount that you contribute that matters; it is the sacrifice you give that invites the Lord’s blessings into your life. This dear widow’s sacrifice was without equal when compared to the great abundance from which other offerings were given. You may feel like the poor widow, but you

will not always be without abundance and eventually will likely be able to offer more. But then and now, even if you don’t have an abundance, you can always help those in need.

#### **4. Service and Good Works**

Fourth, service and good works. Jesus taught, “Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.”<sup>29</sup> One way to bear fruit in the gospel is to provide service and good works. Your generation excels in this area.

I think of former efforts under the Mormon Helping Hands banner and now with JustServe. You have responded wonderfully to the call to serve your fellow men and women, and you have accomplished much good.

I invite you to find a way to sustain or even increase your efforts, particularly during this time of year. At Christmastime, I know that it is easy to get caught up in the “What’s in this for me?” mindset and to ask, “Who will give me gifts, and what will I receive?” Frankly, as we mature in life and in the gospel, and as we deepen our discipleship, our mindset should shift more toward “What can I give and to whom?” That is how a disciple of the Master would view the season. He or she focuses much more outwardly than inwardly. And as we focus outwardly, we come to know our Savior more fully, because we are beginning to think and act as He did. He thought only of others, and, as our Master Disciple, His is the optimal example for us to follow.

#### **5. Love One Another**

And finally, fifth, quoting from both scripture and my favorite hymn, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”<sup>30</sup> I remember singing this simple hymn, “Love One Another,” to myself every day of my mission. It reminded me that I needed to love those I was called to teach and to see them as their Heavenly Father saw them.

Today, amid our contentious times, President Dallin H. Oaks has taught:

*Loving our enemies and our adversaries is not easy. “Most of us have not reached that stage of . . . love and forgiveness,” President Gordon B. Hinckley observed,*

adding, “It requires a self-discipline almost greater than we are capable of.” But it must be essential, for it is part of the Savior’s two great commandments to “love the Lord thy God” and to “love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:37, 39).<sup>31</sup>

Your efforts to love your fellow men and women will be the hallmark of your efforts to deepen your discipleship. However, I feel it important to caution you not to invert the two great commandments: the first being to “love the Lord thy God” and the second to “love thy neighbour as thyself.”

This seems to be an increasing area of confusion and misunderstanding—surely clouded by the adversary. The adversary knows that if he can invert these two great laws in our minds, then he can entice disciples from the path and dissuade others from stepping onto that path. We must be careful that in our efforts to love our neighbor we don’t begin advocating against the Lord.

Some, in their efforts to love others, feel it necessary to abandon the teachings and commandments of God or to advocate for a change of His doctrine. But to love God is to accept His teachings, commandments, and doctrine. Remember that Jesus taught, “If ye love me, keep my commandments.”<sup>32</sup>

A true disciple does not try to change the Teacher, His teachings, or His laws of discipleship. Jesus warned of this when He taught, “The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord.”<sup>33</sup>

Brothers and sisters, guard against such subtleties in your efforts to love your neighbor. The adversary will attempt to lead you to believe that you are aligned with the Lord by loving your neighbor in a way that leads you to then question those who have been called to lead and direct His kingdom on earth. You might find that you are then not aligned with those who have properly and correctly prioritized these two great commandments. Those who invert the two put themselves and their neighbors ahead of the Lord, their Master Teacher, and seek to counsel Him and His called leaders.

Please guard against this increasingly popular and potentially spiritually fatal deception by

remembering that sometimes the best way to love your neighbor is actually to advocate and stand for the teachings of the Master.

In closing, please know that I love you. The words I have offered are an attempt to help bring you nearer to your Savior and Redeemer—to bring you into greater proximity to Him and to help you be the righteous and striving disciples favored by Him.<sup>34</sup> This is the greatest gift that I can give to you this Christmas season.

It is my sincere prayer that you will make efforts to deepen your discipleship as you reflect on your Master Teacher at this time of year and always and that you will resolve to continue on the path of discipleship even in your low moments. I pray that you will not abandon the Teacher who loves you perfectly and who freely gave of His will in order to fulfill the plan of the Father that we all may be reunited with Him again someday. I know that He lives and that He is the Master Teacher and Master Disciple, and I rejoice that we are under His loving care. I bear witness of these things in His sacred and holy name, even Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. Bible Dictionary, s.v. “disciple.”
2. D&C 98:12.
3. 2 Nephi 28:8.
4. 2 Nephi 28:9.
5. John 6:66–69.
6. D&C 93:13.
7. JST, Matthew 3:24–25 (in the Bible appendix); emphasis added.
8. Moses 4:2.
9. John 19:30.
10. Mosiah 15:7.
11. 3 Nephi 11:11; emphasis added.
12. “Agency and Accountability,” Church of Jesus Christ Gospel Topics page, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/agency-and-accountability?lang=eng](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/agency-and-accountability?lang=eng).
13. 2 Nephi 2:27.
14. See Moses 4:3.
15. See D&C 29:36.
16. Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail,” *Ensign*, November 2020; emphasis in original; quoting Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Israel.”

17. D&C 41:5.
18. Matthew 5:44; see also 3 Nephi 12:44.
19. John 8:31.
20. See 2 Nephi 31:16; 3 Nephi 27:16.
21. See D&C 131:1–2.
22. D&C 52:40.
23. “The Work of Salvation and Exaltation,” *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, July 2020 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ, 2020), 1.2 (p. 2), [churchofjesuschrist.org](http://churchofjesuschrist.org).
24. Mosiah 4:16.
25. Mosiah 4:19.
26. Mosiah 4:20.
27. Mosiah 4:26.
28. Mark 12:42, 44.
29. John 15:8.
30. John 13:35; see also “Love One Another,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 308.
31. Dallin H. Oaks, “Love Your Enemies,” *Ensign*, November 2020; quoting Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Healing Power of Christ,” *Ensign*, November 1988.
32. John 14:15.
33. Matthew 10:24.
34. See 1 Nephi 17:35.