“Characteristics of True and False Disciples”
*July 14, 2013*
*John 6:16-29*

I. Introduction

To understand today’s Scripture, we need to consider where the various followers or disciples of Jesus were coming from. First, there are those disciples who believed that Jesus was the Messiah—this included the Apostles. At least seven of Jesus’ 12 Apostles were fishermen—none of them would be called “learned men,” but they were religious men. They had been looking for the Messiah and they believed that they had found Him. In *John 1:45* we read, “Philip found Nathanael and told him, ‘We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’” Although they were true disciples of Christ—believers, they had some misconceptions about the Messiah. Like the majority of the Jews, they expected the Messiah to be a warrior-king. Even after Jesus rose from the grave and was about to ascend into heaven, they asked Jesus in *Acts 1:6*, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” They may have been confused in some issues, but in their hearts, Jesus was their Lord and Savior.

There was another group of people who were also disciples of Jesus, but they were not believers. These false disciples were following Jesus for what He could give them to satisfy their physical needs—food, healing, entertainment, along with any other supernatural sign. In these two stories we see the response of true disciples and the response of false disciples.

II. First, the Response of True Disciples – Let’s begin with a little background

A. The Background  The disciples—both true and false—had just seen the biggest miracle Jesus ever did—feeding over 15,000 people with only 5 small loaves and 2 fish. The crowd was amazed; there was even a movement to make Jesus king. Everyone was excited because of the miracle, even the 12 Apostles couldn’t help but be excited. It must have seemed to them that their Master was finally getting the honor He was due. They had prayed for God’s kingdom and their prayers were about to be answered. As Jesus closest followers, many of the 12 would have rejoiced at the chance to become famous and powerful. Without a doubt, Judas would have become the treasurer of the kingdom; perhaps Peter would have been named prime minister.

Knowing their hearts and not wanting them to be caught up in the crowd’s superficial enthusiasm, the Lord removed the 12 from this dangerous situation. *Matthew 14:22* says, “Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while
he dismissed the crowd.” They probably didn’t understand why He would send them away at that time, but they obeyed Him anyway. This led to . . .

B. The Supernatural Sign. Did Jesus know that a storm of coming? Of course he did. But He needed to rescue His friends from the danger of being swept away by the fanatical crowd and, just as importantly, He had to continue their education. They had experienced great joy in being part of a huge miracle. The feeding of the multitude was the lesson; the storm was the examination after the lesson. Had they finally learned that Jesus never fails?

As they crossed the Sea of Galilee toward Capernaum, the disciples found themselves caught in a sudden, unexpected storm. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark tell us that the wind blew the disciples and their boat a “considerable distance from land” (Matthew 14:24) toward the “middle of the sea” (Mark 6:47). Continuing to piece the story together from Matthew 14, Mark 6 and John 6, we also see that the disciples left for Capernaum sometime between 6 and 9 pm and were still rowing early the early morning—some time between 3 and 6 am. During those long, dark, exhausting and stressful hours, they had rowed only about 3 to 3 ½ miles.

Being in a storm doesn’t mean you are out of God’s will. There are storms of correction—who could forget Jonah. But as 1 Peter 1:6-7 tells us, there are also storms of perfection. Titus 2:14 says that Jesus “ gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” The disciples had done what Jesus had commanded. The storm wasn’t a punishment; it was lesson to teach them how to respond in a storm and a test—Had they learned how to call on Jesus when in trouble? Their hearts and minds needed to be purified—they needed to learn to not lean on themselves but to call out to the Lord in their need.

While the disciples were struggling, Jesus was alone on the mountain praying. But He hadn’t forgotten His disciples. He planned to help them at the perfectly correct time. But God’s timing isn’t our timing. Jesus may not come at the time you think He should come, but He knows when you need Him the most. In Isaiah 43:2 the Lord said, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.” Jesus waited until the ship was as far from land as possible. It wasn’t until the disciples had lost hope in themselves that they were ready to turn to God in faith. Then Jesus came to them.

Suddenly, through the darkness, the wind, the stinging spray and the gigantic waves, “they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water.” They weren’t used to seeing people walking on the
water, so, understandably, “they were terrified.” By walking on the water, Jesus gave His disciples visible proof that He is the Creator and controller of the universe, including mastery over gravity.

C. Then we see The Response. The disciples had responded as anyone would have—what they were seeing wasn’t natural. But Jesus calmed His panic-stricken disciples by telling them, “It is I; don’t be afraid.” Earlier Jesus had compelled them to leave without Him, but now He had returned to them in a most unexpected way.

Bold and impulsive as always, Peter couldn’t wait for the Lord to get in the boat. He was so eager to be near Jesus that he climbed overboard to get to Him sooner. Turn to Matthew 14:28-31.

The story of Jesus’ walking on the water actually includes not one miracle, but up to four miracles. Not only did Jesus walk on the water, but so also did Peter—at least for a short time. Matthew and Mark record a third miracle: when Jesus got into the boat, the wind immediately stopped (Matthew 14:32; Mark 6:51). Finally, John writes that “immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.” This may be a fourth miracle or John may simply mean that since the water was now calm, they reached the other side in no time. It may just be the language of love—with Jesus in the boat it didn’t seem far to the other side at all.

In Matthew we see the response of the 12—turn to Matthew 14:32-33. As we see so many people in Scripture do, the only appropriate or correct response to Jesus Christ is to fall before Him in worship. The 12 were amazed by Jesus’ miracle and responded as all true disciples of Jesus Christ do—with adoration and praise from their hearts.

III. The Response of False Disciples

John’s second story contrasts the response of the 12 Apostles with the response of the crowd which Jesus had just fed—the False Disciples. They too had witnessed Jesus’ divine power, but, instead of responding with heartfelt worship, they responded with selfishness and greed. Here we see a mystery.

A. The Mystery John writes that the following day, a crowd gathered, almost greedily, to satisfy both their curiosity and their stomachs. Some may still have been planning on making Jesus king. Others had come in boats from Tiberius to see the Miracle Worker. But there was a mystery—how did Jesus get to Capernaum?

The crowd had seen the disciples leave in a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum, and then the men had disappeared into the storm. The crowd had also seen Jesus leave the place and go by Himself to a mountain. But the next morning, here were Jesus and His disciples together in
Capernaum. Certainly He had not walked around the lake, and there was no evidence that He had taken another boat. Other boats had arrived—some driven by the storm, but Jesus had not been in any of them. The crowd was baffled by His supernatural appearance.

Although the crowd sought Jesus, they did so for the wrong reasons. They followed Him for what they could get—they weren’t interested in either worshipping Him or obeying Him. The previous evening they had experienced His power. They had witnessed and benefitted from that supernatural sign. But instead of humbling themselves and worshipping Him, they wanted more from Him. They wanted Jesus to serve them.

B. The Response

To the Apostles, the response or enthusiasm of the crowd for Jesus must have been impressive. But Jesus was not impressed. He knew the desire of their hearts. Originally they followed Him because of His miracles, but now their interest had degenerated to the level of food. Sadly, they wanted more food—not more Jesus.

Jesus ignored their irrelevant question about His appearance there and addressed the deeper issue of their sinful motives. He pointed out that there are two kinds of food: food for the body and food for the inner man, the spirit, which is essential. In Matthew 16:26 He said, “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” What the people needed was not food but life, and life—eternal life—is a gift. Food only sustains this short physical life, but Jesus gives eternal life. Turn to Isaiah 55:1-2.

In response to Jesus command to seek the spiritual, nonperishing food of eternal life, the people completely missed the word “give”—eternal life was and is a gift from God. Instead they “said to Him, ‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’” Filled with legalistic religion, they thought they had to “do something” to merit eternal life and like the rich young ruler of Matthew 19, they wondered what work they needed to do.

Jesus made it crystal clear that only one “work” was necessary—“to believe in Him whom God has sent;” i.e. to believe on the Savior. Salvation is by grace alone (Ephesians 2:8-9) through faith alone (Romans 3:28) in Christ alone (Acts 4:12). When a person believes on Christ, he is not performing a good work that earns him salvation. There is no credit in believing, it is what God does in response to our faith and this faith will inevitably produce good works.

In the beginning, the people had been intrigued by Jesus’ healings and they had been satisfied for a time by His miraculous meal. But their enthusiasm soon faded when Jesus didn’t respond as they
wanted—demanded. Their curiosity turned to rejection. Later in John 6:66 we are told that “from this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”

IV. Conclusion

So which disciple are you? It is easy to be a false disciple. It is easy in the US to come together and go through the motions of worshipping Jesus Christ. It is easy to pray to God for things—important things like healing or wisdom or even food. But false disciples do not come to Christ to bow down before Him; they come seeking personal gain. False disciples are selfish. When their selfish desires do not materialize, they give up on Jesus altogether. We may not be able to tell the false from the true, but as 1 Samuel 16:7 says, “The Lord looks at the heart.” God can tell the false disciple from the true disciple.

There is more to being a disciple than coming to church and going through the motions of worship and prayer. There is a cost to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ. Turn to Luke 14:27-35. A true disciple gives “up everything he has as.” Jesus warned that to be His disciple also means to love Him above all else—even one’s own family. Turn to Matthew 10:34-37. To be Jesus’ disciple also means to love Him more than life. In Luke 9:23-24, Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.” To be a true disciple of Jesus Christ means to be willing to submit to Christ’s lordship in everything—even if it means persecution and execution. True disciples submit to Christ in everything. No price is too high for the gift of eternal life.

So what kind of disciple are you—true or false? What is your response to Jesus Christ and His call to "Come, follow me" (Matthew 4:19)?