

Aspects of Discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount

Paul Cristian Ionașcu

*PhD(c), "Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad, Romania
ionascu_paul2002@yahoo.com*

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to explore some aspects of Jesus' discipleship described in the Sermon on the Mount. Taking into account notable writings on the concept of discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount by prominent theologians such as R. T. France and Bonhoeffer, this article examines these aspects. We will analyze the inner aspects of the Matthew text, aspects that Jesus presents. An indication that Jesus spoke in the text is that the disciples (prophets) know each other by their fruits (Matthew 7: 15-20), meaning according to their deeds. Furthermore, it is also important due to the fact that many Christians in the world claim to be disciples of Jesus, but their deeds show the opposite. Our analysis will extend to the concept of discipleship during the period of the Second Temple, a period that also includes the time in which Jesus lived. Following this, we will look at some concepts that Jesus presents in the text, giving special attention to the inner aspects emphasized in Matthew 5-7.

KEYWORDS: Sermon on the Mount, Discipleship, New Testament, aspects, Second Temple, Gospels

Introduction

Some theologians see a close connection with discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount. For example, R.T. France, in the New Bible Commentary, states about the Sermon on the Mount as follows: „The controlling theme around which this material is collected is that of discipleship, or „life in the kingdom of heaven”. Having called his first disciple, Jesus set out for them an overview of the privileges and the demands of their new situation” (France 1994, 911; France 2007, 153-155; France 2008, 126-129). A book with such a conception - discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount - was also written by Daniel Patte: *Discipleship According to the Sermon on the Mount: Four Legitimate Readings, Four Plausible View of Discipleship, and Their Relative Value* (Patte 1996, 29-397). A similar opinion is that of Sherman Johnson and George Buttrick. They see in the Sermon on the Mount a message addressed to the disciples. They state: „He has something been called „ecclesiastical”, „legalistic”, or „Judaistic”, but actually his greatest interest is in the moral life of the Christian community” (Johnson and Buttrick 1980, 278).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer also analyzes the message of the Sermon on the Mount from a discipleship perspective. The martyr Bonhoeffer sees in the first part of the Sermon on the Mount the extraordinary of the Christian life (Bonhoeffer 2020, 91; 1979, 115-220). The extraordinary thing about the Christian life is that the disciples have come out of this world and follow the Shepherd. The message from the Matthew text (Mt. 5:1-2) is addressed to the disciples, and what is spoken by Jesus and written by Matthew, the promises, the commands described in the Sermon, belong to them. And in the second part of the book, he sees the hidden character of the disciple from the perspective of the Christian life (Bonhoeffer 2020, 137).

In the following, we will discuss the aspects of discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount. We will look at the text of Matthew and analyze some aspects of discipleship that we find in it. First of all, we will analyze what is the concept of discipleship in rabbinical thinking from the period of the Second Temple as well as in the writings of the Gospels, given that the events described in the gospels took place during that period. Following this, we will examine the inner attitude of the disciple from the perspective of beatitudes. Then, we will look at authentic piety of the disciple, followed by an exploration of Non-Retaliatio and Forgiveness, from the perspective of Jesus – an

attitude that characterizes the disciple of Jesus. Finally, we will discuss the essence of the gospel message: radical love, and conclude with the last characteristic of the disciple: obedience. Listening and applying the words of Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount is likened to a security that the disciple of Jesus has.

The concept of discipleship from the perspective of rabbinical thought during the period of the Second Temple and from the perspective of Gospels

I would like to research the concept of discipleship from the perspective of rabbinical thought during the period of the Second Temple and from the Gospels' perspective. Many of the teachings found on the pages of the gospels have their origin and are found in the thinking of the rabbis of those times. For example, Jesus states: „Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7: 12). This statement does not belong to Jesus personally but is the statement of Rabbi Hillel. He had a golden rule that went like this: „That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study” (*Shabbat* 31a). Another example is that of John 7: 37-38: „In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.” This expression is found in Jewish tradition from the time of Jesus (*mSukkah* 4: 9; *bSukkah* 48); „let your houses be gathered around the wise, and let us drink of their words with joy” (*Pirkei Avot* 1: 4).

In the times of the Second Temple, the disciple was called *a talmidim*, (Strong 1999, 774) being the student of a rabbi who had to learn the knowledge that the rabbi possessed: (Marshal 2008, 1322) „*talmidim*- plural Hebrew noun meaning „disciples” in its truest sense: those who leave family to study and follow the ways of their teacher [rabbi]. They study not only to learn what their teacher **knows** but to become the type of man their teacher **is**” („Talmidim”, in *Psalm 11918.org*; Stolenbagerger 2005). This kind of thinking and practice was also adopted by John the Baptist and the Pharisees (Marshal 2008, 1322).

In the opinion of the Romanian theologian Ghiță Mocan, discipleship is a process that begins with conversion. It associates the life of faith with discipleship. He states: „But the life of faith is not an event but a process. It begins at conversion and continues through a constant process called: discipleship” (Mocan 2014, 7). On the other hand, Vine (1952, 316) explains the term from two grammatical perspectives: a) noun: one who learns from his teacher, who imitates him, and b) verb: someone who was made disciple. In a dictionary edited by Merrill Tenney, we have a similar opinion to that of Vine's, when he explains the term in point a: „the word implies the acceptance in mind and life of the views and practices of the teacher” (Tenney 1965, 45). According to other theologians, the disciple is one who is part of the body of Christ, the Church (Rotaru 2017, 57-76; Smith 1901, 77; Tenney 1965, 45; Marshal 2008, 1322) is a christian. Opting to become a disciple of a rabbi required unwavering dedication in the ancient times, a notion that remains true in contemporary practice. A disciple would immerse themselves in the study under their rabbi, dedicating all of their time to absorbing and emulating their mentor's teachings and interpretations of the Scriptures, as well as the application of those teachings in daily life. This type of relationship is mirrored in the way Jesus interacted with his own followers, as depicted in the scriptures (Matt. 10:24-25; Luke 6:40). He intentionally selected them to be in his presence (Mark 3:13-19), so that they could emulate his ways (John 13:15), (Miller 2012, 176-195).

Typically, *talmidim* would actively seek out the mentorship of rabbis they admired. Sometimes, individuals approached Jesus with this intent (Mark 5:19; Luke 9:57). A select number of rabbis distinguished themselves by choosing their own disciples. When a pupil desired to be mentored by a rabbi, he would express his wish to „follow” the teacher. The rabbi would then

assess whether the student had the potential and willingness to emulate his ways. Rejection was common, but occasionally a student would receive an invitation to „follow me”, signifying that the rabbi saw in him the qualities and dedication needed to mirror his life. This was a significant vote of confidence from the teacher to the *talmid*. They were called to remain close to him (Mark 3:13-19), to adopt his path (Mark 1:16-20), to adhere to his teachings (John 8:31), to replicate his deeds (John 13:13-15), and to prioritize their rabbinical studies above all else (Luke 14:26). (Laan, „Rabbi and Talmidim”, in *That the World May Know*).

Jewish rabbis honor their students, as they wish to honor their own, and vice versa. This truth transcends time and reaches the present day and is practiced by the most eminent teachers with their eminent students. The Romanian theologian Marcel Măcelaru writes an article in honor of his teacher Peter Kuzmic (Măcelaru 2011, 107-124). A Jewish tractate, (Terinte 2016, 18-19) called *Pirkei Avot*, writes about this fact: „Let the honor of your disciple be as dear to you as your own, and the honor of your neighbor [as important] as the respect for your master, and the respect for your master as the respect you show to Heaven” (*Pirkei Avot* 4:12). Jesus, being a Jewish rabbi, well versed in rabbinical teachings, teaches his disciples a similar teaching: „The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master” (Luke 6: 40; Matt. 10: 24).

Those close to Jesus were called disciples (Marshall 2008, 1322). In Marshall's opinion, „discipleship was based on a call made by Jesus (Mk.1: 16-20; 2: 13)” (Marshall 2008, 1322). According to Jesus: „The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master” (Luke 6: 40). The Christian disciple has the duty to be like his Teacher, that is, to be like Jesus (1 Ioan 2: 6). The character of Jesus is very well seen in the Sermon on the Mount. In the following, we will present some aspects of the true disciple.

The Beatitudes: (Thermitus 2020, 17-233) Attitude (Fărăgău 2013, 131-137) of the Heart

The Sermon on the Mount focuses a lot on the internal disposition of the heart. It is not just about external actions but the attitudes behind them. The Beatitudes highlight qualities like humility, meekness, and hunger for righteousness as foundational for discipleship. The Sermon on the Mount is not just a rulebook, it is an invitation to a deep internal transformation. Sherman Johnson and George Buttrick says:

„... the Beatitudes show that for Jesus righteousness is more than the sum of his commandments; it is a *total attitude of mind, a particular kind of character*. Those who are praised in the Gospel are men and women of humility, love, trust, fidelity, and courage. There are not yet perfect, but they are converted. Their interest and desires are turned in the direction of the kingdom of God” (emphasis is mine) (Johnson and Buttrick 1980, 280).

Matthew Henry also interprets the beatitudes as part of the Christian's character and as an attitude of the heart. In Henry's opinion „Our Savior here gives eight characters of blessed people” (Henry 1997, 864). Tasker sees in the happiness the characteristics of the Christian disciple (Tasker 1971, 61). Lenski sees the same thing - the inner attitude of the disciple - but he claims that this is not a state of this world but one of the Kingdom: „All this blessedness is spiritual, each part of it coming from the great Messianic Kingdom ...” (Lenski 1943, 183). What Lenski states is that the beatitudes are the inner attitudes of the true disciple. A similar opinion is that of Morgan (Morgan 1929, 41-42). He unites the beatitudes with the kingdom of God. He writes about the character of the disciple and about their mentality. The beatitudes are the manifestation of God in the believer. A very good observation is that of Walvoord who states:

„The Beatitudes pronounce those blessed, or happy, who fulfill these six standards of the kingdom in character and experience: those poor in spirit, or consciously dependent on God;

those who mourn; those who are meek, or humble; those who thirst after righteousness; those who are merciful; pure in spirit; and who are peacemakers, although persecuted for righteousness' sake, are proper disciples and subjects of kingdom" (Walvoord 1974, 46).

The Romanian theologian Iosif Țon, on the other hand, writes about the importance of changing the lifestyle following the salvation received from God (Țon 2021, 28-29). In order to be able to keep the principles described in the Matthew text 5-7, a new birth is needed, a radical transformation of the interior (Țon 2021, 30). Another view is that of John Stott, who presents the beatitudes as a unitary whole rather than as distinct groups:

„The Beatitudes present the balanced and multi-colored character of Christians. There are not eight distinct groups of disciples, some of whom are gentle, while others are merciful, and others are called to endure persecution. We have instead eight qualities of one and the same group of people, who must at the same time be meek and merciful, poor in spirit and pure in heart, weep and thirst, make peace and be persecuted" (Stott 2005, 25).

Authentic Piety

Discipleship involves genuine, heart-driven actions. Jesus talks about authentic prayer, fasting, and giving without seeking the applause of the crowd (Ryle 1986, 62-65, 2016, 52-54). It is not about putting on a religious show but about sincerity in your relationship with God. Jesus addresses religious practices and highlights the need for authenticity (Rotaru 2012, 5). The Pharisees fell into the sin of hypocrisy and were no longer sincere in their religious practices. When they did a thing, whether they prayed or fasted or tithed, they did it only to be seen by men (Matt. 23: 5; 28). In contrast to these, Jesus says: „Beware of doing your kind deeds before men, in order to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in the heavens. Thus, when you do a kind deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do, in the congregations and in the streets, to be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward" (Matt. 6: 1-2).

Tasker associates righteousness with piety. In his opinion: „The best attested reading in vi. 1 is „righteousness”. ... the verse 1 was intended as an introduction to the whole of this section, and that „righteousness" (*dikaiousune*) is here used as a general term for „piety" or religious practice" (Tasker 1943, 71). In Barclay's interpretation, the actions described in Matthew 6 are good things, but some practice them for the wrong reasons. He says: „To the Jews, there were three great cardinal works of the religious life, there great pillars on which the good life was based – *almsgiving, prayer and fasting*. Jesus would say that so often in human life, the finest things were done from wrong motives" (Barclay 1958, 184).

Like beatitudes, these acts also seem to be based on an inner act. Ferguson says: „Furthermore, true righteousness is expressed, says Jesus, in the disciple of the believer" (Ferguson 1987, 109). Of course these acts are religious duties that the disciple must perform. But the reason why he does them is very important. According to Stott, Jesus mentions that the disciples are not to be like the Pharisees or the pagans:

„I first mention the ostentatious religion of the Pharisees and say: *And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites* (v. 5). He then turns to the mechanical formalism of the pagans and says: *Therefore do not be like them* (v. 8). So, again, Christians must be distinct from both the Pharisees and the pagans, the religious and the irreligious, the church and the world" (Stott 2005, 135).

Non-Retaliation and Forgiveness

It's a call to break the cycle of retaliation and revenge. Discipleship means being willing to forgive, even when it is tough. In the teachings presented on the Mount, the essence of being a disciple revolves around embracing compassion and forgiveness over the instinctual responses of vengeance and retribution. This approach challenges disciples to exhibit patience, offer kindness in the face of hostility, and to extend mercy where it is least expected. In the Gospel of Matthew we have a parable told by the Lord Jesus in which he presents the importance of forgiveness that we must offer to others as God also forgives us. It is the parable of the merciless servant (Matt. 18: 21-35). After Jesus said the Lord's Prayer, He gave a warning to all His disciples: „For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt, 6: 14-15).

Radical Love

In the teachings about discipleship, the central theme is the embodiment of love. This principle underpins the entire concept of learning from a spiritual mentor and is integral to the message delivered in the Sermon on the Mount. It is not just about loving those who love you back; it is about loving your enemies, turning the other cheek, and going the extra mile. It is a love that is not bound by reciprocity (Rotaru 2010, 7). It is sacrificial love; „it is a supreme human value” (Oprean 2022, 549). Citing Stăniloae, Daniel Oprean says that God is: „the structure of Supreme Love” (Oprean 2022, 551; Stăniloae 1994, 245). The apostle John makes a powerful statement: „God is Love” (1 John 4: 8b). Daniel Oprean also states that this love is „embodied in Christ” (Oprean 2022, 556-557). Lenski argues that the love described in Matthew 5:44 is a restoration of Old Testament truths that rabbinic authority had perverted (Lenski 1943, 246). The love described in the text is a continuous love. Lenski states: „He use the plural to include all his hearers, and the present imperative ἀγαπάω means „love constantly” (Lenski 1943, 246). In the same regard John Stott states:

„We have already seen that the commandment to „love thy neighbor and hate thy enemy” is an outrageous perversion of the Law, because of what it omits from the biblical commandment and what it adds to it. It deliberately narrows the standard of love (omitting the essential words „as thyself” which raise this standard very high), as well as its goal (specifying what is meant by „nearly”, excluding enemies from this category, and adds instead the commandment to hate them). I call such perversion „outrageous” because it is completely without justification, and yet the rabbis pointed to it as a legitimate interpretation” (Stott 2005, 122-123).

According to Ferguson (1987, 102-103), the love prescribed by Jesus is higher than that of the Old Testament. For him the love that Matthew presents is unconditional: „The mark of „perfection” in the Christian is just this: his love is not determined by the loveliness or the attractiveness he find in its object. His love is not conditional upon his being loved first. His love is not directed only towards those whose love he can rely on in return” (Ferguson 1987, 104). Iosif Țon, on the other hand, sees in the commandment to love one's enemies a perfect act. Whoever can do this has become like God (Țon 2021, 315).

Building on a Solid Foundation

The sermon concludes with the analogy of building on a solid foundation. True discipleship involves not just hearing Jesus' words but putting them into practice, making them the foundation of one's life. In Ferguson's view, building a solid foundation requires a choice (Ferguson 1987, 169-171). This is a truth that Jesus also says to his disciples: Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If

any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matt. 16: 24). We are dealing here with a lesson about „the uselessness of a mere outward confession of Christianity” (Ryle 2016, 71). The truth is what Ryle stated: „not all who declare and call themselves Christians will be saved” (Ryle 2016, 71). A second important lesson from the text is also stated by Ryle: „The second lesson here is a striking picture of two categories of Christian listeners. On the one hand those who hear and do nothing, and on the other those who hear and do—both are placed before us, and the histories of these men are followed to their proper end” (Ryle 2016, 72). Walvoord expressed the following truth about this parable: „This masterful address, comprehensive and authoritative in its pronouncement, astonish the people. ... The teaching of Christ was in great contrast to the way the scribes taught and clearly showed that this was the truth of God” (Walvoord 1974, 58).

According to Lenski, Jesus' words, „these words of mine” (Matt. 7: 24), refer to what he said earlier (Lenski 1943, 309). That is, to the message in the Matthew text 5-7. Adding Proverbs 10:25 to Matthew 7:24-27, Barclay states: „The writer of Proverbs gave Him the hint for His picture... Here is the germ of the picture which Jesus drew of the two houses and the builders” (Barclay 1958, 295). Stott, on the other hand, says:

„The truth upon which Jesus insists in the last two paragraphs of the Sermon on the Mount is that neither mere intellectual knowledge of Him nor mere verbal profession can substitute obedience - although both are essential in themselves. The question is not whether what we say about Jesus is nice, polite, orthodox or zealous. But the question is whether we do what we say and whether we do what we know, in other words, whether the reign of Jesus we confess is one of the major realities of our lives” (Stott 2005, 229).

Conclusion

In this article we have endeavored to show some aspects of discipleship that we find in the Sermon on the Mount. Before examining these aspects, we looked at the concept of discipleship from the Jewish point of view and from the point of view of the New Testament. I have shown the way of thinking of the rabbis of the Second Temple period regarding discipleship. This rabbinic perspective on discipleship is also evident in the New Testament, both in the life of Jesus and the apostles. The Beatitudes show the inner attitude of the disciple as in fact the entire teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. The notion of genuine piety is about the inner part, about the attitude of the heart. He warns the disciples not to fall into this sin when they do such acts. Furthermore, this article addressed the imperative for disciple not to seek to take revenge but to embrace the duty to forgive according to the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew and love his enemies. By practicing these truths, the disciple establishes a solid foundation—a solid foundation that cannot be torn down. Anyone who lives according to the principles written in it has a solid foundation. Compared to the Pharisees, who only show external piety (Matt. 23), the disciple is called to surpass this piety (Matt. 5: 20). In the teaching of Jesus, we find the way to relate to God in a correct way, not like the Pharisees who were hypocrites. They were the ones who distorted the image of God's way so that people no longer had a correct image. Through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus restores the authentic path, highlighting the aspects that characterize true discipleship.

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