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Discipleship

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Phil. 3:1-16; Luke 14:25-35; Matt. 28:19.

"Salt therefore is good: but if even the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned?"

That may seem to be a strange way of concluding these very strong and serious words about discipleship, but undoubtedly this is the Lord's way of summing up what He has just said. The "therefore" has that significance. After these words of challenge, these sifting words, He says, "Salt therefore is good"; and so He links salt with discipleship, and gives us in that one word, and in what we know about that particular thing salt, His idea of discipleship: the salt and its savour. The Lord relates this to the nature of relationship with Himself.

In verse 25, we read that "there went with Him great multitudes", but it is quite clear that that does not satisfy Him. Just to have great multitudes in a kind of association with Him can never satisfy His heart. So He turns to this great following, this great association, and He challenges it, and tests it, and that in a very severe way, and He says that unless certain things obtain, it is impossible to be His disciple. There may be an association, a kind of attachment; there may be a form of following, an interest, a sentimental relationship, a professed devotion; there may be even the taking of the name of a follower of Jesus Christ; but He says that the only thing that can really justify is discipleship. The only thing that really satisfies His heart, and the only thing that proves true relationship with Himself is discipleship. What He is after is disciples; not followers, but disciples; not a multitude, but disciples. Gathered into that word, that designation, is everything of a true, living relationship with Himself, which will work out to the realisation of His own ends and purposes. So He speaks of the savour of the salt. I wonder if there was a kind of glance at the multitudes in what He said, and He regarded them as bulk, as a mass, but at present without that savour which is essential. And then He

sought to sift out in order to get a company represented by salt having savour, for the real value of the salt is its savour.

You see, the whole of this paragraph has to do with value, the thing that is effective, the thing that accomplishes, the thing that gets right through.

One illustration is of the man who contemplates building a tower, and the question is as to whether he has the resource for achieving the object of the tower. Will the purpose be reached? Will the thing become in value an actual reality?

Another illustration is of the man who contemplates going to war. The question for him is as to whether he has the resource to carry through the campaign, the final triumphant issue. Is the element there which will really do the work, achieve the end, accomplish the purpose, and stand at last in the place of absolute triumph?

Will this man have his tower? Will this other man have his victory? Everything is determined by the element of real effectiveness, and that element, says the Lord in effect, is found in true discipleship. And true discipleship which is effective, accomplishing the end, getting through, demands everything; it is going to cost everything. "So therefore whosoever he be of you that renounces not all that he has..." It may mean father, mother, wife, children, brethren, sisters, and his own life also. You see, the Lord is very thorough, comprehensive, drastic, for He says unless relationship with Himself will stand such a test, and is upon such an utter basis that He is more than all else, we shall not get through. If we have got something else - father, mother, and so on, and our own lives - something that we are clinging to that could in any way come between us and Himself, we shall not get through. If that should be so, no matter what it is, not only in our living relationships but in our life interests, ambitions and so on; so that if the question arose as to which it was to be, the Lord, the Lord's will, the Lord's way for our lives, the Lord's plan for our lives, or this; if there should be any ground whatever for our being held, drawn by this other thing, then we have not the effectiveness, we shall not get through.

The Lord does not always press this thing actually and literally to its conclusion, but what He does demand, and what He does test us on, is an utterness of our apprehension of His own value. That is, He seeks to discover in us by this means or by that, whether we have recognised that the knowledge of Him is of far greater importance than any other thing that can come into our lives, that He really represents more than all else. It is something that has to be established, and He says that, "Unless it is so, you cannot be My disciple!" But here is the secret of effectiveness, discipleship, (which in its true nature and meaning is utterness for the Lord) it is that the Lord has the place supremely in our hearts.

Get any man or any woman there; if the Lord can get any one of us there, where that is proved to be our state, then such a life is going to count; such a life is going to tell, there is going to be something accomplished in that life. That is the thing here. Can this man show an accomplishment, whether it be in building or in warfare? Can the thing be accomplished, achieved, finished, established, a life purpose rounded off? The secret of effectiveness, of accomplishment, is the utterness of the Lord in our lives, and the utterness of our lives for the Lord.

If I said no more, that would be enough for us to think about. After all, effectiveness is the matter that counts, is it not? It is not name, not title. Call it salt, but it is not that until it has proved itself to have the sting to do the work. It is not the name, not the bulk, not the association, not the appearance; it is whether there is that element there which is counting, which is effective, which is

getting through, which is doing the work, which is registering itself. That is true salt, that is salt with savour.

What is discipleship? "...He cannot be My disciple". Discipleship is coming under discipline. When we use that word "discipline" in our modern English, we usually think of being severely dealt with, severely handled, but it has a wider meaning than that, and its fuller meaning is simply being taught, instructed; it is learning. It is all gathered up into that other word of the Lord: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of Me..." (Matt. 11:29). That is union with Christ for the purpose of learning Christ. That is discipleship. Effectiveness, says the Lord, is according to our knowledge of Him, our living knowledge of Him.

Here we have this outstanding disciple, Paul. Was ever a man more closely yoked to his Lord? Hear him speaking as a disciple: "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord... That I may know Him". That is discipleship. It is very impressive that when Paul wrote those words his public ministry in this world was at an end. He was in prison. It was "Paul the aged", who will presently be penning in another letter, "I have finished my course... the time of my departure is at hand" (2 Tim. 4:6,7). And that man in prison, knowing the end is not far off, perhaps a few days or weeks, or a little more - it may be a year or two, but that is all - cried thus: "That I may know Him..."; "the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord". Just for a moment try to grasp what that must imply. You are dealing with no ordinary man. He is the man who started his course with seeing Jesus glorified, and then on the way more than once he had a heavenly revelation, was once caught up into heaven and shown unspeakable things. The Lord had said to him at the beginning that He would appear unto him concerning things for his ministry.

There had been a very large revelation of the Lord Jesus, probably such as no other man has ever had, and at the end his one passion is to know Him. I submit to you that it implies that Paul recognised that there was something in the Lord Jesus of such value, and such meaning, that the Lord Jesus represented something as to the thoughts of God which is worth more than all that this world can give at least to know. Oh, what a wealth there must be in the Lord Jesus if that is true, what a fulness, what He must be, what He must signify, what He must mean! And it is to learn the meaning of Jesus, the content of Jesus, God's thoughts in Him, God's purposes in Him, what He stands for. No, not only what He has done. This is not now that great realm of our salvation. Paul knew that. That is, the basic salvation concerning sin and redemption. And it is not now just the matter of sanctification as in this life. He is seeing that there is in the Lord Jesus a whole universe of divine fulness, and that that fulness is to be known, and as that fulness is known, this life is enlarged, enriched, and strengthened, and becomes effective and fruitful. He is after the savour of the knowledge of Christ.

We know quite well that in Bible symbolism salt stands for that which registers itself against corruption and death. You remember the sons of the prophets, who came to Elisha concerning the waters of Jericho and the curse resting upon them. There was untimely death everywhere because of the element of death in those waters, and Elisha said, "Bring me a new cruse!" He put salt into the cruse, and the salt met the power of death and corruption, and overpowered it, set it aside, and life was the result - life and fruit. That is the savour. The savour of the knowledge of Christ is a living knowledge of the Lord Jesus. It is knowledge which is life. So Paul says, "That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection...". It is knowledge and life - life by knowledge. That is discipleship.

You see we are getting very near home. The challenge is this: What is the value of all our knowledge? We have a large knowledge. What a tremendous amount we hear! What a tremendous amount of information is given to us! What a lot we know! Do we assume that, because we have all that

knowledge, we are really livingly related to the Lord Jesus? The test is: What is the value of our knowledge? Is there a sting in it? Is there a living element in it? Is there effectiveness in it? Is it a knowledge that is going through to accomplishment, to reach the end? Is it, in a word, living knowledge? "This is life eternal, that they might know Thee". Is my knowledge of Him life? Is the life commensurate with the knowledge, proportionate with the knowledge? Suffer that interrogation. This is not judgement. It is seeking only that you and I shall not be of a crowd, but be disciples.

If we will put ourselves into His hands and have a very definite transaction with Him, and say, "Now, Lord, I want, and I trust You, that the real value, the savour, the life, the effectiveness, shall be brought abreast of my knowledge; that You will make all the knowledge living knowledge, experimental knowledge, effective knowledge." If you do that the Lord will take you at your word, and the Lord will work accordingly; but let me warn you of what you might expect. You may expect the cross, because that is here right at the heart of it, and how the cross operates. We can have romantic ideas about the cross, taking up the cross, romantic ideas about laying down our life. The cross will operate just in that way with each one of us best known to the Lord in His wisdom and understanding of us, in that way which will find out whether it is to be Him or our own life. It comes down to a very simple practical application.

The Lord may not ask you if you will give your life to go abroad to some foreign land and spend and be spent for Him. Some of you would jump at that. There would not be much cross about that. The Lord knows quite well that would not be the test for you; it might be for some, but it may be just exactly where you are that in some way it will work. It is no use trying to think how it would be, because if you could light upon it, of course you would be prepared for it. The Lord is going to take you just at some point where there is all the possibility of you saying, "If it had been anything else but that! The Lord could have touched a thousand things, and I would have had no question about it! Oh, if only He had asked anything but that... If only the Lord would have called me to take any road but that one!" Yes, just upon that one thing the issue is resting. The question is the Lord, or that? But you see, that one thing is capable of gathering up everything. All the other things go for nothing if we are held there. All life is suspended on one point. Faithfulness is necessary, because the Lord was very faithful with these people. He did not allow them to get into a false paradise, into a false realm. He said, in effect, "I told you, I warned you if you are really going through with Me to the end it is going to be everything", and everything for you may hang upon one thing. Ah, yes, but if the Lord can get us to the place where we say, "...all things loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord", then there is going to be a ministry of life, an effectiveness, a telling. That life is going to be one which has a glorious achievement at its end.

Do not get visions of achievement, do not begin to build airy castles about accomplishment. It is just going to mean that the life counts, that that mighty element of God's own life which is indestructible, which is eternal, will count. What more do we want? Not things here, not popularity, not fame, not to be taken account of in this world, not to have a name; but that now and afterward, and through eternity there shall be that which is the fact of Christ, the life, abiding, the fruit of His resurrection, that which is now indwelt by His indestructible life. That will be a power, that will be a victory; effectiveness; living knowledge of the Lord.

We have to have our own dealings with the Lord. The question for us is, "all that he has" for the Lord. I am not sure that when Paul first saw what it was going to cost that he got through very easily without much difficulty. It is all very well to write it afterwards as in this letter to the Philippians. While he was going through it no doubt he felt the pinch, he felt the cross, but as he went through, as he held nothing back, as he said to every fresh demand, "Yes, Lord!" as he responded, there came to him as he went on in that way of renunciation a growing knowledge of the Lord Jesus, which at

the end of his life made it possible for him to speak like this: "Yes, now I count it refuse!" It is comparison, you see. According to this world's standards it is not refuse, it is of great price with this world; all these things that he mentions are of great value, great importance, but as he came progressively (not all at once, but a little at a time) to know Him, and as that knowledge grew as he took the course of renunciation for his Lord, then the other things lost for him their supreme value, he was able to see them in the light of the transcendent, the excellency, the excelling knowledge of Christ.

This is no mere language. It is costly, and you feel it, and you suffer in the cost, it cuts deeply; but if you have no controversy with the Lord, and if in the conflict, in the struggle, in the pain, in the anguish you say, "Yes, Lord!" and if you let go to the Lord, and say, "Lord, if this can work out for Your glory, then all right", believe me, you will slowly, (it may be for the time being unconsciously or imperceptibly, but nevertheless surely) you will be coming to the place where you say, "If I were asked now to exchange my knowledge of the Lord for those things which were once to me the most precious, I would never contemplate it. The knowledge of the Lord is more to me than everything!" Believe me, there is no end to that. Paul came to the place where there was no end to that. All his years, and all his knowledge, and all his experience here did not prevent him saying at the end, "Brethren, I have not yet attained... The excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord is still in front of me, it is still before me... That I may know Him".

Oh, that the Lord would give us still some further illumination as to the significance of Jesus Christ, what He stands for. It is not knowing about Him, it is knowing Him, learning Christ, and in so learning, life taking on savour. Believe me, the effectiveness, the fruitfulness of our Christian life depends upon the measure of the living knowledge of the Lord, not what we hear in meetings, but what is worked into us at cost. That is turned to account. Let us be satisfied at least, with that.