

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Bearing Fruit Through Difficult Times

by Dan Trygg

“But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. ² For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, name-callers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵ holding to a form of religion, but having denied its power; *avoid such people as these.*” II Timothy 3:1-5

“But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁸ ...‘In the last time there will be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts.’ ¹⁹ These ...cause divisions, are worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit. ²⁰ But you, beloved, *building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit,* ²¹ *keep yourselves in the love of God, eagerly anticipating the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life.*” Jude 1:17-21

“...the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and *hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.*” Luke 8:15

Living an authentic, healthy Christian life is *not* easy. Paul said, “...*through many tribulations* we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Jesus said that anyone who would follow Him must be willing to *deny himself*, take up his cross *daily*, and follow Him (Lk. 9:23). **The Lord did not call people to simply make a belief-decision; He called them to a way of life, a path of discipline.** Disciples are people who are willing to *devote themselves to learn* what He taught, and *apply themselves to obey* His teachings, so that they could *live as He lived*.

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is a difficult thing in even *the best of times*. We who seek to follow Christ are going *against the grain* of the world around us. In order to follow Jesus, we have to reevaluate what life is all about, and choose priorities and practices that differ from how most people choose to live. Jesus laid it out very clearly for us in a word picture found in Matthew 7:13,14. He said that the entrance is wide, and the roadway is broad that leads to destruction, and many people are on that road. The way of discipleship, however, is described as having a narrow gate that few even *find*. The way that is beyond that narrow gate leads *away* from the broad way, and the multitude shuffling along that road. **The path of discipleship is *not* broadly paved and well-marked. It is described as a trail that is narrow and “pressing-in”, like a footpath through dense underbrush.** There is not room for groups of people to travel along three or four abreast. **This path can only be traversed *single-file, ...one individual at a time*.** The trail is not clearly marked like the thoroughfare most people are on, with its billboards, advertising and road signs. The discipleship trail is more like a blazed hiking path. The markings *are* evident that indicate others have been there before, ...and you *can* make out the track..., but it takes *more concentration* and *effort*. **Discipleship is *not* a stroll down memory lane, or a walk in the park. It is *not* for the casual or impulsive.** Those who make their way very far up this trail are *those who are determined*, or willing to *become* so. **Traveling this path will strengthen the heart, harden spiritual muscles, heighten one’s awareness** and sharpen one’s trail skills. Those who make their way along the discipleship path become strong, healthy and they discover new abilities and capacities they had not previously experienced. **Following Jesus requires a clear mindset. We need to know *what we are pursuing, what we are after*,** because the world-system is never far away. It calls out to us, and wants us to give up the quest, and rejoin the multitude.

To be a disciple is to choose to be *an authentic individual*. *You make the choice* to break from tradition, from family custom and from societal expectation, where need be. *You determine* to follow your heart for Jesus, to put *Him* first, before all the other demands on your time and energy. *You decide what is really important to you, and set your course and your calendar by that priority,* namely that *your relationship with God comes before everything else*. This world is trying to squeeze you into its mold, and as a Christ-follower *you choose to break out of the expectations and programming of others.* **Jesus said that following Him would sometimes lead to *conflict*.** If you put *Him* first, others will not like it. They will begin to poke fun at you, mock you, call you names, ostracize you, ...all because you choose to follow a different path. They will accuse you of judging them, ...even when you are *not*! The change you are making in your priorities bothers them, ...even if you are not *trying* to impose your thoughts or beliefs on them. Why is that!? Jesus said that people love darkness, because their deeds are evil (Jn. 3:19-20). They don’t like anything to expose their selfishness, even if indirectly! **Jesus observed that fruitful disciples are those who receive His word with an *honest and good heart*.** This means they are *not fake, nor do they pretend to be something they are not* in order to please others. **There is no room for hypocrisy in healthy discipleship.** Ironically, sometimes the temptation to pretend is stronger in relation to the religious community. Our fleshly desire to “fit in” and “be accepted” motivates us to “cover up” our struggles and faults. *No lie* is of the truth, however (I Jn.

2:21). **If we are *not* honest, we soon find ourselves *protecting and harboring sin!*** *Pretense* allows sin to grow and percolate in the darkness of dishonesty. **An honest, good-hearted disciple is quick to get his or her struggles out into the open.** Confessing our faults and failings, first to God (I Jn. 1:9), and then to compassionate, like-minded Christ-followers will generally bring comfort and counsel to help us in our walk. We need to be selective about who we share with (Matt. 7:6), but it *is* valuable to have at least one confidant that we can open up to. God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble (Jas. 4:6-8; 5:14-16).

A healthy, fruit bearing disciple is one who *lives by the word of God.* Jesus said that he hears the word, and holds it fast. To “hold it fast” means that he will not allow anything else to steal it away. **Not only does he keep the message *in focus*, but he invests in *learning more.*** Jesus said that the one who continues in His word is a genuine disciple, and he will come to know the truth that will set him free from bondage to sin (Jn. 8:31-36). More than just learning, however, **the fruit bearing disciple *applies what he is learning in his day-to-day life.*** Obedience produces positive change in his or her life. **As the disciple draws near to God, the Lord will begin to answer and respond to him** (Jas. 4:8; II Chron. 15:2; Zech 1:3).

Learning and following the word of God and the leading of His Spirit motivates Him to reveal Himself. Recognizing the prompting and activity of God in your life is the key to victory and abundant fruitfulness. Responding to and working with the Spirit is the partnership with God that produces the fruit. Staying on target, and continuing in this process, is essential for greater fruitfulness and effectiveness.

The apostles warned us that there will be especially difficult times that some of us will have to navigate. Take a moment to read through the passages at the top of this study. You can certainly identify attitudes and practices that are characteristic of much of our culture. There used to be a higher level of respect, a semblance of biblical morality and civility in our society. This has been eroding away for the past several decades, and the cultural backdrop in which we live is much more toxic to the spiritual life. Paul said that “difficult times will come”. **The Greek indicates that these times are “hard to bear, difficult to deal with, or even dangerous”.** In light of what I wrote above regarding discipleship, you can certainly see *why* these are difficult times. **We are surrounded by a culture that has little time for God.** What time people do invest tends to be limited to an hour a week that is generally little more than a form of religion. **There is *no expectation of any real change or power.* In fact, there is little *desire for change.* People want to live as they please. They don’t want to be answerable to God. They want God to serve them.** Many churchgoers are in pursuit of a God who will make them rich and powerful, not one who will lead them to serve Him by serving others. The people Paul describes have become not only selfish, but many have become very negative and hurtful to others. **People have very strong opinions, and they can sometimes be very aggressive in their mockery or verbal attacks, when they find out you are a Christian.** Oftentimes, they are reacting to a judgmental, legalistic parody of Christianity, not the humble followers of Jesus. Paul, however, describes some people who are genuinely “haters of good”, not just people offended by organized religion. In any case, they can be very hostile. **In the Jude passage, these mockers and self-seeking opponents of the faith have actually infiltrated the church!** They are *not* outsiders, attacking or rejecting Christians to keep them away. They are people who have come *within* the church to prey on unsuspecting people within the group. **They cause divisions and hinder the work of God, as well as lead people astray.**

What are we to do to avoid the damaging influence of these people, whether from within the church or on the outside? **First of all, Paul plainly tells us to *avoid the most hostile and resistant people.*** This agrees with Jesus’ counsel to the twelve. He told them that if people did not receive their message, they were to move on (Matt. 10:14). This is important, because we can get entangled in fruitless discussions, arguments and relationships that are going nowhere (II Tim. 2:23). They are a waste of time and effort, and keep us from more productive interactions. At times, if we don’t leave, we may find ourselves on the receiving end of a more serious attack. We find Paul practicing this rule of thumb repeatedly in his ministry. **Secondly, we are to *focus on keeping ourselves at our spiritual best.*** Building ourselves up, praying in the Spirit and keeping ourselves in the love of God – Sounds like what we were talking about above regarding discipleship, doesn’t it? **We must keep our focus on God, and our walk with Him. We have no control over these other people around us. What we *can* affect is the focus of our lives,** i.e., the investment of *our* time, and the choices *we* make. ***The power and effectiveness of our Christian witness is dependent on the quality of our walk with God, and the effectiveness of our partner-relationship with Him.*** If we are not responsive to Him, how can He use us? If we have grieved or offended Him, we will have no spiritual power. We will see little fruitfulness or effectiveness, if we are left to our own abilities. No. We must stay focused on the basics. Build ourselves up in our faith; be praying in the Spirit; and keep ourselves in the love of God. **As we persevere in these fundamentals, we are energized to *press through* the resistance, and *will* bear fruit even in difficult times.**