

SERMON: "Disciples of Faith and Hope" (Romans 5:1-5)

By Rev. Clarence G. Page

I want to begin our message with a question. Have you heard these words: "Are you a Christian? Are you a follower of Jesus Christ?" I wonder how many of you remember hearing them growing up. Well, we still hear them from time to time today. Being a Christian or a disciple was very important and highly focused or recognized years ago. That was then; what about now? Are these words important? What do we think? How does one know that he or she is a disciple or follower of Jesus Christ? What about you? How do you know you are a disciple? Are you convinced about that? How do you know what it means to be a disciple? Is it the way you talk and act, or is it how you live day in and day out? I raise these questions because a disciple or a Christian is what we proclaim and believe. It is what we seek to do in our daily lives. Of course, it takes specific standards and particular requirements to follow Christ. Our relationship with Christ determines our faith and hope.

A disciple can be defined in different ways. Here are some descriptions of a disciple: it is a person learning about Christ and staying close to him, fixing one's whole life to be like him, and pointing people to him. A disciple believes and seeks to follow Jesus in their own daily life, striving to be like him. It is when an individual has been baptized and is willing to take upon themselves the savior's

name and follow him by trusting in him alone for salvation in worshiping, loving him with one's whole heart, imitating one's life, and obeying his teaching. Every disciple should be committed, sincere, and a dedicated servant of the Lord, which is our calling as believers.

In reflecting on these descriptions or definitions, we can see that a disciple is required to have a personal relationship with Jesus and a strong desire to live in pleasing him. To do this, we should have love and compassion. Love is the foundation of having a meaningful relationship with him and one another. Jesus once said, "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." What Jesus is saying here is very important. He is talking about love, loving one another as disciples. Being a disciple means more than believing, trusting, and striving to be like Jesus. Being a disciple is showing love and giving love. In other words, how can we be like Jesus and don't show love or give love? Jesus doesn't want us to give love only to those who love us back. He wants us to love others, the sick, the distressed, and those less fortunate than we are. Loving others means loving those who don't love us back; loving those who do us wrong and sometimes get away with it. Hearing this, I know isn't the same as doing it or living it each day. Following Christ is a sacrifice. We must be willing to sacrifice and be willing to suffer. Apostle Paul talked about

suffering. He said, "we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces endurance. We should be willing to suffer.

Jesus once said these words, "Everyone will know you are my disciples if you love one another?" He knew that pride and self-centeredness could dominate the true meaning of being a disciple, following him. Pride and self-centeredness can hinder our spiritual growth. When we don't let our hearts be like Jesus, we can quickly lose focus and become caught up in ourselves. When our hearts aren't like Christ, we can lose heart and become cold-hearted instead of having a heart like him. Jesus wants us to be humble, obedient, faithful, and loving. We must stay focused on him who thought it not robbery to be equal with God something to be grasped for his own advantage; rather, he made himself as nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, in our likeness. And being found in the form of a man, he humbled himself becoming obedient to death- even death on a cross! Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Jesus became human just like us simply because he loved us and was willing to do the will of God by sacrificing his life for us and the whole world.

So, in our day, in our time, where do we go from here? How should we live as disciples today? How can we be witnesses in such a complex world? There are so many things happening now that can easily cause anyone to question their faith and hope in Jesus. Some people are saying Jesus died a long time ago or that he never existed. People today seem to find it challenging to connect with Jesus or believe in him, or maybe this is only my thinking. It seems we are having more horrible and cruel episodes of suffering than ever, and people seem to become more and more very touchy and quick to explode and do harm to another. So, how should we be disciples in these challenging times? How can we show the love of Christ? What did Jesus do? There is one thing he didn't do. Jesus didn't force himself on people and didn't make anyone believe him. Jesus spoke only truth and demonstrated God's goodness. He didn't make anyone accept him and neither did he stop and give up on his purpose to do the will of God. Jesus once said to Philip, "Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I say are not my own, but my Father, who lives in me, does his work through me. Just believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in me. Or at least believe because of what you have seen me do. Anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done and even do greater works...."

As disciples, Jesus said we are to do more significant works than He. We are to follow him, be his witnesses, and do it in love with a sincere heart. We must

be compassionate and not pushy or cruel; wise, yet steadfast in our faith and relationship with Jesus Christ, whether we are received or not. We can be humble because he was humble and because we believe. We have faith. We have hope. We must take to heart these words of Jesus when he said, "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." We are his disciples and must be about his goodness. There is a song I love, and it says:

I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
No turning back, no turning back.

In closing, I must say these words of Paul are very important. He said: "Since we are justified by faith, we^(a) have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access^(b) to this grace in which we stand; and we^(c) boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we^(d) also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

It is from these words of Paul, I can say we are justified by our faith in Jesus and should always claim and proclaim the hope we have in him always, even in our difficult and challenging times. We must keep looking to him despite the circumstances and suffering in this world today. We have victory in the Lord simply because he is our victory and hope. Amen.