

# Disciple vs. Apostle

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

Psalm 67

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32

Matthew 15:21-28

A new preacher began his first pastorate at a little old country church. The first Sunday, only one person showed up for the morning service, a little old man in bib-over-alls. The preacher said to the man, “Brother, you seem to be the only one to show up this morning, should I preach or what?” The little old man replied, “Well Sir, I ain’t no preacher, I’m just an old farmer, but if I had a truck load of hay, and I went to the pasture and only one cow showed up, I’d feed that cow!” The preacher, inspired by these words of wisdom, began to preach. Finally, after two hours of preaching, he asked the old farmer, “Well, brother, what did you think of my first sermon here?” The little old man replied, “Well, Sir, I ain’t no preacher, I’m just an old farmer, but if I had a truck load of hay and I went to the pasture and only one cow showed up, I wouldn’t dump the whole load on him!”

As I prepared for my final homily at Christ the King, I noticed within myself a desire to “dump the whole load” on you! I’ll refrain, however. Instead of a two-hour sermon, I want to invite us to look more closely at the difference between discipleship and apostleship—a topic that you’ve heard me mention on numerous occasions. The reason why I think it’s important is because **how we handle change, individually and as a parish, is based primarily on where we are at in our spiritual journey—whether we are beginning disciples or mature apostles.**

In many ways, a disciple and an apostle are very similar. The New Testament uses these words interchangeably in some places, but distinctly in others. In Greek, the word translated “disciple” means a pupil or one who learns from another, whereas the Greek word for “apostle” means a person who is sent. In order to better describe the important spiritual difference between discipleship and apostleship, I’m going to use two extremes—*beginning discipleship* and *mature apostleship*.<sup>1</sup> A great starting place for understanding the difference between these is Sacred Scripture.

There were many people who followed Jesus. Most of these men and women were undoubtedly interested in learning more about Jesus. They were intrigued by His miracles and exorcisms—“He has done all things well. He makes the deaf to hear and (the) mute to speak” (Mark 7:37). They were captivated by His preaching—“The crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7:28). But, many of them did not want their interest in Jesus to radically change their lives. In other words, they were willing to follow Jesus’ miracles and teachings to a certain point, but no further. Chapter six in the Gospel of John is a great example.

A large crowd diligently looked for Jesus near the Sea of Galilee. When they found Him, He began to teach them about the Bread of Life, saying, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world” (John 6:51). This became much too personal and radical for the majority of the crowd. They thought Jesus had gone *way too far*. They weren’t willing to accept His teaching. We read, “Then many of his disciples who were listening said, ‘This saying is

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<sup>1</sup> Despite this distinction, it’s important to remember that mature apostleship *does not exclude* mature discipleship. Rather, the mature apostle has become a mature disciple, as well.

hard; who can accept it?” (John 6:60). We are then told that “many [of] his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him” (John 6:66).

These beginning disciples were unable to make the transition into a more mature journey with Christ. The heart and the life of Saint Peter, however, had been changed and transformed by Christ, and so his response to Jesus’ difficult teaching is much different than the disciples who “returned to their former way of life.” As they left, Jesus asked the Twelve, “Do you also want to leave?” (John 6:67). Peter responded, “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). While Peter was not yet a mature apostle (as indicated later in the Gospel story), he had grown enough in his discipleship to not have his faith shaken by a difficult teaching.

We can also see the difference between the beginning disciple and the mature apostle in the letter to the Hebrews. The author of Hebrews addressed the difference writing—

Although you should be teachers by this time, you need to have someone teach you again the basic elements of the utterances of God. You need milk, [and] not solid food. Everyone who lives on milk lacks experience of the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties are trained by practice to discern good and evil.

-Hebrews 5:12-14

Let me offer some practical expressions of the differences between “beginning disciples” and “mature apostles,” which might give us a sense of where we are at in our spiritual journey and how God is challenging us to grow—

- † A beginning disciple approaches change as a form of victimization, wanting to place the blame on someone or something, whereas a mature apostle understands change as an opportunity to grow closer to Christ.
- † A beginning disciple is concerned with what Jesus is doing for him or her, whereas a mature apostle is concerned with what he or she is doing for Christ.
- † When a beginning disciple feels any form of deprivation (the loss of love, security, peace, acceptance, etc.) the primary response is anger, whereas the mature apostle understands deprivation to be an opportunity to offer to others what they themselves are missing.
- † A beginning disciple comes to Mass to get something out of it, whereas a mature apostle comes to Mass to put something into it.
- † A beginning disciple sees obedience as a burden, whereas a mature apostle understands it as a blessing.

As our parish makes this transition, we are being challenged out of a beginning discipleship and into a more mature apostleship, for the greater glory of God.

### **SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:**

- ✚ Another great Scripture example of beginning discipleship is the story of the rich young man in Matthew 19:16-22. Read through this story slowly a couple of times and then place yourself in the story instead of the young man. How would your response to Christ be different than the response of the young man? What does your response tell you about the nature/quality of your discipleship and apostleship?