



Discussion Guide

Session 3: With Friends Like These...

There is a lot to accomplish in this lesson. If you think you'll run short on time, I suggest that you skip either B1-2 or C1-3. The questions in E may also be skipped. With all these texts, the "Reading Guide" may give you more insights.

For Your Information Questions:

- ◆ The texts in questions A1-3 create a generally positive attitude towards the disciples.
 - A1) It seems as if Simon, Andrew, James, and John know absolutely nothing about Jesus when he calls them. Whether they are familiar with Jesus or not, the impression is left of an immediate, responsive, unquestioning discipleship. At this point, we as readers may be starting either to admire their faith or question their judgment in following so blindly or be troubled that they would leave their father. The statement in 10.28-30 appears to confirm the correctness of their behavior in following Jesus, but 10.31 looks like a warning: "Many [disciples?] who are first will be last..." (By the way, the rest of the disciples are listed in 3.13-15.)
 - A2) The disciples (and also we who are reading the gospel) are in a privileged position of having everything explained, but 4.13 hints at their future troubles in understanding.
 - A3) The view presented of the disciples here is very positive. They apparently obey Jesus fully, they accept the difficult conditions under which they are sent out on their mission, and they have success exorcising demons and performing healings.
- ◆ Questions B1-2 look at two stories about a storm on the sea. Part of the point here is that if the disciples messed up the first time, they should have 'gotten it' the second time.
 - B1) The disciples' apparent fear is certainly understandable, but their question to Jesus is a harsh rebuke and challenge. They seem to assume that Jesus could save them, but they also indicate a lack of confidence that Jesus will save them. It is difficult from Jesus' saying in v. 40 to discern his attitude. Is it disappointment? Anger? Frustration? Resignation? The disciples' response of "awe" is appropriate, but their question certainly seems to indicate a lack of understanding. Our opinion of the disciples would seem to be somewhat ambiguous. Do you as the reader know the answer to the disciples' question?
 - B2) Again, the disciples' fear is understandable, *if we assume that they don't know (or recognize) Jesus*. Jesus' response to the disciples in 4.40 ("Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?") would seem to be more appropriate here. This time, however, Jesus looks to be more compassionate and concerned to calm their fears. (Then again, what do you make of 6.48b?) Mark indicates that the disciples are "utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened." This is not a flattering description!
- ◆ Questions C1-3 recount two feeding stories. There is some ambiguity about their responses in the first story, but there is no excuse for their failure in the second.
 - C1) It is hard to tell if the disciples are expressing compassion, exhaustion, frustration, or selfishness. V. 37 indicates that money is part of the issue, and there is some irritability between Jesus and the disciples on this point. To the disciples credit here, they do obey Jesus and find and distribute the food, but there is no record given of their response.
 - C2) This time Jesus, whether out of compassion as the text says or also to test the disciples, asks them to feed the crowd. Money doesn't seem to be the issue this time, rather, that they are out in the wilderness. Note, however, that the first feeding specifically was stated to have occurred in the wilderness / desert too! (6.35) Again, the disciples obey Jesus and find and distribute the food, but there is no record that they figured out what was going on.
 - C3) When we get to 8.14-21, we see that they are stuck on the idea of bread and just don't get what is going on. Jesus appears to be frustrated, angry, or disappointed with them.
- D) Compared to 4.41 when the disciples were still wondering who Jesus was, here in 8.27-30 they finally seem to have gotten it right. After Jesus starts talking about his suffering and death, however, we still see that they are as clueless as ever regarding Jesus' ministry. (By the way, don't be too hard on Peter in contrast to the other disciples. Note that in 8.33 he looks at the disciples while rebuking Peter.) True discipleship consists in self-denial and bearing of suffering and death for Jesus' sake.
- E) 9.18 states that the disciples can't perform the exorcism. It is unclear whether it is the crowd, the scribes, or the disciples Jesus has in mind when he addresses them as a "faithless generation." When the disciples pursue the matter later, implicit in Jesus' response is that the disciples are not praying enough.
 - ◆ In F1-2, the disciples learn about self-sacrifice and then promptly fail to demonstrate it.
- F1) In 9.32 we are told that the disciples are ignorant and afraid. To prove it, we find out that while Jesus is talking about his suffering and death, they are talking about who is greatest. In a surprisingly gentle manner, Jesus teaches them about self-sacrifice by the example of welcoming a child.

F2) A short time later in 10.13-16, we find the disciples sternly refusing to welcome children. Jesus gets “indignant,” and we readers ought to be angry too.

◆ G1-3 focus on Peter and his denial of Jesus

G1) Having read this far in the gospel, we can be quite sure that Jesus will be right and Peter will be wrong. I still think, however, that Peter is genuinely sincere about not deserting Jesus.

G2) Peter did follow after Jesus (14.54), but he becomes increasingly vehement in his denials of Jesus. In one sense, we have a right to be indignant with Peter, but on the other hand, especially in light of 14.72, we might have some sympathy for him as a person who wanted to do right but failed under pressure.

G3) The text is not explicit, but my sense is that it is an acknowledgment of Peter’s denial coupled with the promise of reconciliation.

◆ The various characters in H are all peripheral characters, “little people” in the story, yet they all are depicted as more faithful than the 12 disciples.

H1) Despite Jesus’ command, it seems right that the leper should tell everyone about Jesus. There would be a problem, however, if the leper is simply telling about Jesus as a miracle worker.

H2) “Legion” is the first commissioned missionary! I am not sure if there is some subtle criticism of his mission work, however. Jesus told him to tell what the Lord had done and the mercy shown him. In 5.20, it only states that he told what Jesus had done for him (i.e., the miraculous exorcism) but does not mention anything about mercy. (Is this why the people respond with amazement and not faith?)

H3) The woman is said to have had faith. Just as significantly, she is said that she *knew* what happened to her. The disciples never quite know what is happening.

H4) The woman’s tenacity is evidence of her faith.

H5) Not only does Bartimaeus have faith and confess Jesus as the “Son of David” (a royal designation), but he also follows Jesus on the way to Jerusalem.

H6) Jesus says of her, “She has done a good service... She has done what she could...” She becomes part of the Gospel message!

H7) Joseph was a member of the council, and the council had a key role in getting Jesus condemned. (14.55, 64) So, it was a bold move on Joseph’s part to get Jesus’ body in view of his council connections, and it required even further boldness to ask for it from Pilate in view of political ramifications. A key part of the description of Joseph is that he was “waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.” (15.43)

H8) The same Greek root is behind “rocky” ground as is in Peter which means “rock.” It is particularly fitting in view of what happens later in the story that rocky ground people first hear the message with joy but later fall away when trouble or persecutions arise.

For Your Consideration Questions:

1) The disciples are certainly portrayed as normal, fallible, human beings. We have seen their good intentions and their obvious failings. More than anything, they seem to be portrayed as characters who don’t really understand who Jesus is and what he is about. Perhaps, though, that portrayal is largely due to their having not experienced the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are not told about the nature of their discipleship following the resurrection—the kind of discipleship to which we are called.

2) Over and over, to follow Jesus as a disciple means service, being last, self-denial, obeying Jesus and having confidence and faith in him, faithfulness in prayer, having compassion, suffering and even death.

3) There ought to be some variety in the ways people perceive the disciples.

4) The people in H are generally characterized as being faithful. They know what Jesus is about and recognize in some way who he is. They all confess Jesus, even in the face of risk or peril. More interestingly, they are all “little people” or “outsiders” to the story, people who would be regarded as least in society.

5) ...

6) The storm stories do portray instances where it may appear to us that God is sleeping or not present or intentionally passing us by. But they also demonstrate that ultimately God does save and preserve us, even when we respond in anger towards God or in fear.

7) The disciples are sent out in pairs as one way of confirming the truth of the message they bear (see Deuteronomy 17.6 on the need for two witnesses) and as a reminder of Christian community. By having so little with them, they were always reminded of their need to rely on God.

8) ...

9) All three are possible, I think, but hopefully the first answer is the strongest one.