

BE A LIFELONG LEARNER

The root meaning of the Greek word for disciple is “a learner.” Christian discipleship is a lifelong learning process.

Jesus himself invites us to join him in this adventure of learning. “Take my yoke upon you and *learn* from me,” he says (Matthew 11:29). Learn *of* me, some other versions say, and still others, learn *with* me. All are correct. The idea, Jesus says, is to “get in harness with me, join up with me, come to me – and learn of me, from me, about me.”

Learning is a lifelong task and Jesus set the example for it. In Luke 2:46 we find Jesus, at the age of twelve, sitting among teachers in the temple, “listening to them and asking them questions.” Later we see him at the height of his career telling a group of his disciples, “Learn this lesson from the fig tree’ (Matthew 24:32). Then we see him in the final excruciating hours of his life on earth as “he learned obedience from what he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). Jesus was a learner.

Knowing that Jesus was an adventurous and dedicated learner endows a certain dignity and excitement to discipleship that perhaps we haven’t thought about before.

Learning Means Living

In the early years of life, our bodies grow rapidly. Then we slow down a bit until we peak at age twenty. A slow physical decline follows.

Our minds, too, develop rapidly when we are young. When we reach our twenties, we continue learning, but it’s harder. We reach our mental learning peak a little later than our physical peak, but then the same phenomenon occurs: a slow, steady deterioration. Our minds harden and become inflexible. It becomes increasingly difficult for us to learn.

If you are over thirty, how long has it been since you acquired a new skill or adopted new attitudes – political, religious, social, or otherwise?

It is said that when peasants in a certain part of the world say goodbye, they add, “May nothing new ever happen to you!” That saying reveals a narrow mentality, but it is essentially the over-thirty mentality.

Yet the very activity of acquiring new skills, developing new attitudes, formulating new relationships, discovering, daring, exploring, reforming, renewing – in short, learning – is what makes life the adventure Jesus promised in John 10:10, “I have come that they may have life to the full.” If you are not learning, you are not living.

We are called to be disciples, and the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 tells us that we are to make disciples of all nations.” That is, we are mandated to go and make “learners.” Have you ever thought about the Great Commission from that angle?

How We Learn

Learning is based on two important attitudes, plus application.

The first is *openness*. A child is open, and therefore is constantly learning. Everything is new to her. As adults, many of us lose this sense of wonder and curiosity that children innately have.

The apostle Paul was open to learning even as an adult. He said, “I have *learned* to be content, whatever the circumstances...I have *learned* the secret of being content in any and every situation” (Philippians 4:11-12).

I recall traveling by airplane once from Australia to New Zealand, having planned to read during the flight, as is my habit. Just as I opened my book, the man next to me asked, “How do you summon the stewardess?” I showed him the button and went back to my book.

Then the man exclaimed, “Oh, we’re moving!” I nodded yes. He asked, “How fast is the plane going at take-off?” I answered, “About 135 miles per hour.”

“We’re off!” he said soon afterward. “What’s that noise?” “That’s the plane’s landing gear being pulled up beneath us,” I responded.

This man was learning, learning, learning. He continued in that vein for the next two and a half hours. I didn’t get to read a single page of my book. My seat partner was having a new experience and he was as wide open as a toddler.

We also should be open to learn from anyone, at any time, at any place.

The second essential attitude for learning is *enthusiasm*. Learning requires the learner’s participation. One

can't just sit back and learn. We learn by giving it everything we've got.

We learn by touching, seeing, and listening as well as by thinking. Our entire muscular-sensory mechanisms should get involved. It requires acute alertness. Thirteen men were walking past the fig tree, but only one was really alert and aware. Only one was learning every moment at the time. It was Jesus who said, "Learn from the fig tree."

Naturally we can't get motivated and excited about everything. But I've found it helpful to be highly motivated about at least one thing, and to throw myself into that one subject enthusiastically. In the process I've discovered that my awareness increases in other areas, so that while pursuing a single object, I learn many other things as well.

I have a custom of taking on one new learning project each year. I try to choose something outside my vocational field, and something demanding. Half of all that I read that year will be on that subject. When I talk with people, I find that, by asking questions, I can learn from them on the subject as well.

The third foundation for learning is application.

The Psalmist said, "I have more understanding than the elders, for I *obey* Your precepts" (Psalm 119:100). That is the secret. Those who apply the truth will truly understand it. Jesus said, "Anyone who chooses to *do* the will of God will find out..." (John 7:17).

Obstacles to Learning

Of the many obstacles to learning, three are the most important.

The first is *pride*. "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom" (Proverbs 11:2). All through the Scriptures are warnings that pride is the enemy of learning – and therefore the enemy of discipleship.

When I speak of pride, I mean personal pride. When you feel you can't learn anything from someone younger than yourself – or someone with less formal education, or of a different skin color or ethnicity – that's pride.

Perhaps the second greatest obstacle to learning is *cowardice*. In Revelation 21:8 we are given a list of per-

sons who will spend eternity apart from God. Heading the list are “the cowardly.”

One reason we stop learning as we get older is that we lose our nerve. We can learn from new experiences, but we’re afraid of them. We’re afraid we’ll get hurt. In the past we’ve tried opening ourselves up – then WHAM – we’ve been knocked down. If this has happened often enough, we recognize it coming and draw back. But we also stop short of learning.

A price tag on learning is labeled simply, “Fear of Pain.” The pain has always been there, but as we get older, we shrink from it.

The last great obstacle to learning is, ironically, success. Many times those who are apparently successful in life have actually stopped learning. It doesn’t take many minutes of conversation with them to discover that fact. They make statements such as “That’s just the way I am.” Or “You can’t change me. I’m satisfied with my life.” They have stopped learning and growing.

Someone has pointed out that few people change their minds about politics or religion after the age of thirty. Perhaps that’s why the young folk say, “Never trust anyone over thirty.”

Learning Christ

When my son Doug was in the third grade, he had a teacher who revolutionized his attitude toward learning. This teacher believed every day should be a new learning experience.

So when Doug arrived at school on a given day, he would find pillows arranged in a circle with a pile of books in the center. The teacher: “Okay, choose a pillow and pick your book.” The next day there might be a film show; the following day perhaps all the chairs would be aligned and the teacher would teach from the chalkboard.

All this made my son excited about learning. He never knew from day to day what would happen next, except that the teacher was really working to give him a good deal.

What does this have to do with Christian discipleship? Disciples are learners, and learning comes from new experiences. A disciple’s experiences are arranged by her teacher. Jesus is our teacher. He daily arranges special experiences for us, his learners. Jesus is the most imaginative teacher of all time.

When you wake up tomorrow, pray, "Lord, I know you have arranged a whole new set of experiences for me today. Help me to be alert. Help me to be open and enthusiastic. Help me to apply the lessons you teach me. Keep me from pride, from cowardice, and from being dulled by success. Today, I want to learn from you."

This makes discipleship a uniquely personal experience.

Although we should be open to learn from anyone, we must allow the Lord Jesus to pass judgment of the lessons we learn. Paul warns us, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

We are to bring everything under the supervision of Jesus. We must pray at the end of the day, "Lord, this is what I have learned today. What do you think of it?"

Most importantly, we not only learn from Christ and defer to him, we also *learn Christ*. He himself is the object of our learning. Therefore it is important for us to spend as much time as possible in prayer and in reading the four Gospels.

The motto of The Navigators is, "*To know Christ and to make him known.*" Get to know him. Let your life, your thinking, your behavior all revolve around him.

Not many people are true learners. To those who are, the world owes its progress. Fewer people still are learning Christ. Yet the future of the world lies with these people, the Christ-learners. Eternity hangs on them. They are the salt and light of the world.

Are you one of them?