

The Mark of a True Disciple

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[0 : 0 0] Do you have anyone in your life right now who you would say is spiritually floundering? Maybe someone who, if you were to be asked, you know, is that person a born-again Christian, a true disciple of Jesus, you might have some hesitancy. Maybe not sure. Somebody who maybe at one time professed faith in Christ, but now, today, spiritually, they just don't seem to be doing very well. Maybe at times you've wondered what you might do or say to that person to help them or to encourage them. Or maybe you've had some long talks with them already about some of the struggles that they're going through, and maybe it even seemed to help for a time, but now they're back to struggling. Well, this morning we're going to hear from Jesus what he said to people who are in a similar kind of situation. We're going to hear from Jesus what marks a true disciple of his, and we're going to talk about how we might think about people in that spot and how we can help those who are spiritually floundering. So if you have your Bible with you, please open it up to John 8, verse 31. John chapter 8, verse 31. And it's been a couple weeks since we were here in John, so let's just take a moment to remember what's happening here in the story. Jesus is in Jerusalem.

He's been there for the week-long festival. Many people have been there. He's teaching in the temple courts, and there's been some large crowds gathered listening to him. At one point, you may recall, if you were here, that some of the Jewish leaders sent the temple guards and officers to go arrest Jesus.

And after hearing Jesus speak, the guards decided, well, I don't think we should. And then the Pharisees finally came and challenged Jesus openly and directly.

Jesus has been speaking now to the Pharisees, as well as to the people, the crowd that's gathered there in the temple courts. And last we heard was in verse 21 of the same chapter.

Jesus said to them, I'm going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. The people were wondering, where are you going? What place is he talking about? Will he kill himself?

[2 : 3 4] Jesus said, you are from below. I am from above. You are of this world. I am not of this world.

If you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins. Who are you? They asked. Just what I've been telling you from the beginning, said Jesus.

So Jesus is passionately pleading with the people to believe in him. This is their opportunity. He is the one sent from God so that they might be saved, so that the problem of their sins might be dealt with and their guilt taken away.

This is their chance. And he's pleading with them. And we read down in verse 30. Even as he spoke, many believed in him.

Sounds good for those of us who love Jesus and believe in him. We're thinking, yes, finally, some are believing in him.

[3 : 5 0] We're ready to celebrate. But hold on. Jesus has something more to say to those who believed in him that day, which might give us reason to postpone the celebration, or perhaps even to call it off altogether, at least for now.

Let's read verses 31 to 32. To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. So John makes it crystal clear that right now Jesus is speaking not to the Pharisees who are trying to take him out.

He's speaking to those who had believed in him, to the Jews who had believed in him. Jesus said, and we might expect Jesus to say something like, Those of you who believe in me, yes, good, you have now become my disciples.

You will now receive all that I've promised, eternal life. I will raise you up at the last day. But Jesus seems to go in the opposite direction.

[5 : 14] Rather than congratulating them or celebrating them for believing, he says this, he says, if you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

And then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. Jesus seems to speak to these people, who have believed, as though they're not in yet, as though there's something missing, which should cause them to wonder, and us to wonder, if they have really believed in Jesus, or perhaps only believed in a shallow or superficial way.

So as we listen closely in these verses, and the verses that follow, there are plenty of clues given to us, which suggest that these believers believe in some sense, yet they are not true disciples, not true believers.

We get a couple clues in these verses, at least three, just in these two verses. First of all, Jesus tells them that if they are truly his disciples, they will hold to his teaching.

Literally, you will remain in my word. Why does he say that to them? Well, it seems perhaps implied, that some of them only believe in him for the moment, but may later change their mind about Jesus.

[6 : 50] The second thing that we see, clue we see here, he says, then you will know the truth. He speaks to them as if, they don't yet know it.

You need to continue in my word. You need to continue listening to the things I'm saying. You need to take it seriously, and then you will know the truth. So they don't yet seem to know the truth about Jesus.

Maybe they're excited about the possibility that, oh, is this the Messiah? I think so. I think he is. It sounds good. But maybe they don't know for sure yet.

And the third clue that they're maybe not true believers, is in the last thing Jesus says here. He says, and the truth will set you free. That sounds a little weird to our ears, but let's, to maybe hear what they're hearing, maybe a paraphrase.

The truth will liberate you. And as the people hear this, they take offense. What do you mean set us free? What do you mean liberate us?

[7 : 58] We're not slaves. And Jesus, without getting into it, we'll look at it more, a little bit next week. Jesus basically says to them, oh yes, you are.

He says, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. So when we bring all these things together, Jesus is telling these believers that they are still slaves to sin, who need to know the truth that he speaks and be set free.

So those are at least three evidences in this conversation of why these believers believed in some sense, but probably are not yet true believers. And in any case, if there's any more, if there's any doubt or concern, all we have to do is keep reading in this passage and see where the conversation goes.

And it becomes pretty obvious that they're not true believers. We'll get into these verses in the weeks ahead, but Jesus is going to tell them that they are unresponsive to his word, children of the devil, liars, and at least some of them have the desire to murder him in their hearts.

So these many who have believed in him seem to have a shallow or a superficial, on-the-surface kind of faith instead of the kind that Jesus has been calling them to have, a deep faith from the heart, the kind that leads to salvation and eternal life and all that Christ has promised to those who believe.

[9 : 45] And it shouldn't surprise us that some seem to believe at first and then turn away or fall away.

John has already told us about something like this in his gospel earlier back in chapter 2. Do you remember? Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover festival and it says there, many people saw the signs he was performing.

and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about men for he knew what was in a man.

So there was something not right about their faith back on that occasion. They believed in some sense and yet not in the sense that Jesus is aiming at.

and Nicodemus was the example that John gave. He seemed to have some faith in Jesus. We know he said that you are a teacher who has come from God.

[10 : 56] How else could you be doing all these miracles that you're doing? And yet that came that point in the conversation where Jesus looked him in the face and said Nicodemus you don't believe the earthly things I'm telling you about.

So what's the point in answering your questions about the heavenly things? Nicodemus' problem at that moment was the same as the people in this moment.

He had a shallow superficial faith in Jesus just on the surface. He believed in some sense and yet not deeply in his heart all that Jesus has been saying the things he's been claiming.

Perhaps the best place to find insight about what's going on here with these people who believed and yet seems have not truly believed is Jesus' own teaching from the parable of the sower.

I think probably all of you know that parable or have heard it. A farmer went out to sow his seed and as he's doing so some seed falls on different places four different places some falls on the path some falls on the rocky soil some falls on the weed or the thorny soil and some falls on the good soil and depending on where the seed fell there was a different outcome and the only good outcome in which the plant survived and a harvest resulted was the seed that fell on the good soil and Jesus later explained the meaning of that parable to his disciples he told them that the seed represents the word of God and he explained how each of those different outcomes is a picture of how people respond when they hear the word of God which Christ is speaking and we learn from Jesus that it's possible not just possible but that it's even to be expected that some will receive the word of God which Jesus is speaking but then later abandon it later change their minds listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 13 verse 20 the seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy but since they have no root they last only a short time when trouble or persecution comes because of the word they quickly fall away

[13 : 38] I think this is an example of what's happening here with the crowds in the temple courts there's this initial excitement yes could this be the Messiah could this be the one who's going to put an end to all of our big problems I think he is I mean listen to him he sounds good but the word that Jesus is speaking is only being received in a shallow sense it's not putting down roots deep into the heart and so suddenly when there's this big shift and Jesus becomes publicly blacklisted by the religious leaders and it's no longer popular to believe in Jesus and there's even some negative consequences for those who do such as being kicked out of the synagogue or other things suddenly many of these people these same people will be the ones shouting crucify him as the religious leaders are whispering in their ears why because the word that Christ spoke the word of God did not penetrate deep down into their hearts their belief in him is shallow it's superficial surface level they don't know the truth about Jesus and as Jesus says to these people they are still slaves to sin they're still in need of being set free this is the whole thrust of what

Jesus is driving at here and I couldn't help but think you know Jesus is so unlike us if it was you or me and all these people were gathering around to listen and more and more are coming it's like yes this is good let's keep this going let's not say anything that will thin out the crowd but Jesus is not interested in just having superficial followers or surface level faith do you hear what he's saying if you hold to my teaching if you remain in my word you are really you are truly my disciples literally if you continue or you remain or stay in my word truly you are my disciples you see there are disciples of Jesus and then there are true disciples of Jesus according to

Jesus one of the indicators or marks of a true disciple of his is that you remain in his word you hold fast to it you continue to believe you continue to trust you continue to obey to listen to to take seriously his word there are disciples of Jesus and then there are true disciples of Jesus and we've seen an example of this happen already in John's gospel do you remember back in John chapter six Jesus was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum he said I am the bread of life that's come down from heaven to give life to the world and he said some things that day that were a little shocking talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood and of course we talked about that and how he was speaking metaphorically and what followed that his disciples it says grumbled they didn't like what he was saying this is in

John 6 verse 60 on hearing it many of his disciples said this is a hard teaching who can accept that and Jesus looked at them and he said to them verse 63 the spirit gives life the flesh counts for nothing the words I have spoken to you they are full of the spirit and life and then he looked them in the eyes and he said yet there are some of you these are his disciples he's talking to there are some of you who do not believe Judas was one of them the summary statement at the end of that section was this from this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him the reason they left is they did not truly believe in Jesus Jesus started saying some things that people didn't like things that people took offense at things that were starting to make him less popular and people are grumbling and complaining about this they didn't want to be associated with that as soon as some trouble comes they're quick to fall away so they left we're done not following you anymore the mark of a true disciple of

Jesus a true follower of Jesus is that they stay they stay in his word they remain in it they continue to hold fast to it to trust his promises to take seriously his warnings to obey his commands and instructions Jesus said if you remain in my word you are truly my disciples and the apostle John was listening that day not only did he hear Jesus say this in the temple courts and write it down for us here but John himself thought he should remind the believers of that too when he wrote his letter second John verse nine this is what John had to say in his letter he said anyone who runs ahead and does not continue same word remain continue in the teaching of Christ does not have

[19 : 58] God whoever continues in the teaching has both the father and the son in other words if you move on from the teaching of Jesus to something else or to someone else John says it's evidence that you don't have God those who are truly disciples of Jesus know the truth about him they've been set free by it and so they don't move on from Christ to something else they stay they remain in his word John says a similar kind of thing in a slightly different context in his first letter some of you will be familiar with this passage this is 1 John 2 verse 18 dear children this is the last hour writes

John and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming even now many Antichrists have come this is how we know it is the last hour they went out from us but they did not really belong to us for if they had belonged to us they would have remained with us but their going showed that none of them belonged to us now I know that as soon as I read the word Antichrist some of us are in end times prophecy mode but that's not our main focus here this morning Jesus John also talks about many Antichrists plural and he says that they were people who went out from us they were here among us in the church and they left they went out but he says this about them he says they did not really belong to us if they had belonged to us he says they would have remained with us same word remained continued but their going out showed that they never really belonged to us in the first place is essentially what he's saying there once you truly know

Jesus you will never move on to someone or something else you have been born again you will never leave now that doesn't mean that as Christians we will never struggle it doesn't mean that we will never have times or perhaps even seasons of doubt or times where we sin where we turn our face away from Jesus for a moment a time I don't think Jesus or John is saying that the true disciple is only the one who holds to his word perfectly none of us does let's take Peter for an example he was truly a disciple of Jesus that day when all those disciples left it was Peter who said to whom shall we go you have the words of eternal life and we have come to know and believe that you are the holy one of

God it was Peter who made that confession you are the Christ the son of the living God but then three times he said I'm not one of his disciples I don't know I don't know I don't know him he denied the Lord three times a true disciple of Jesus but even as he did it broke his heart he wept it brought him to tears because he did truly love and believe in the Lord Jesus and he turned back to the Lord and that wasn't the only time that Peter sinned even after he had received the Holy Spirit there came that time when Paul had to rebuke Peter mentioned in

Galatians because Peter had begun to treat some of the Gentile believers in a way that wasn't right but again even though he blew it and led some others astray even Peter responded to he repented so yes as true disciples we won't hold to Jesus word perfectly we will make mistakes at times we will blow it being a true disciple of Jesus doesn't mean we will never fail again it means that we will always come back to him when we do it means that you know we may go through a season of doubt perhaps questioning wrestling why do I feel like this it doesn't I don't see the promises of God coming true for me perhaps but at the end of the day we'll always come back if we're a true disciple of Jesus to what Peter said to whom shall we go you have the words of eternal life and

[25 : 30] I believe I know that you are the holy one of God if you remain in my word said Jesus you continue truly you are my disciples so what do we do with all this well I hope before we start applying all of this to other people that we first stop and apply it to ourselves what does Jesus want from you you here sitting in the sanctuary this morning put yourself there in the crowd that day as Jesus is saying this Jesus is not only calling you to believe in him he's also calling you to stay in his word to remain in his word my translation says hold fast to my teaching but

I think the more literal word that Jesus chose remain in my word is on purpose what word Jesus spoken word that is pretty general but probably on purpose it includes all of it Jesus had many different kinds of things that he said his word includes his teaching it includes his claims it includes his promises it includes his prophetic predictions it includes his statement about the reality of what's going on right now it includes his warnings it includes the things that we might wish he hadn't said it includes the things that we love that he said it includes his commands all of those things make up Jesus word and Jesus says that we need to remain continue in those things that he said his word which means that we continue to listen to his teaching we continue to believe his claims we continue to trust his promises we continue to look forward to his prophetic words being fulfilled we continue to look at the world the way that he taught us to we continue to heed his warnings we continue to obey his commands does that describe how you're living right now how you've been living lately if it doesn't

I want to plead with you to come back to repent to come back to remain in Jesus words seek his forgiveness are you opening your bible still every day to listen to the word of Jesus so that you can know him and stay in his word it's here in the words of Jesus in our bibles that God speaks that we can know the truth the truth that sets us free the truth that gives us life the truth that gives us joy and peace and hope and confidence and all those things that we talk about Sunday after Sunday are you remaining in Jesus word that's what a true disciple of

Jesus does and so I urge you to prayerfully consider this word from Jesus as it applies to you these words are for you and finally after and only after we've applied these words to ourselves I think we can find in them some true wisdom that will help us understand what may be going on in other people's lives things but we need to be very careful here and I think we need to approach this with humility we need to admit before we try and do any discerning that only God knows with certainty what's going on in a person's heart we need to admit that God alone is the judge when Christ returns we'll stand before him he will judge it's his job not ours and with these things firmly in our minds I believe these words of

Jesus can help us understand what may be going on when people seemed to believe in the past but now they don't or when people seem to be his disciples in the past but now they're not one of the marks says Jesus of a true disciple is that they continue in his word they continue to hold fast to his teaching which means that if someone as John said moves on moves away from Jesus teaching it may be that the faith that they expressed in the past was only superficial was only shallow now notice that I said it may be we can't know for sure what's going on in the heart of a person but these words also make it pretty clear if they are a true disciple a true believer truly born again they will come back they will come back to remain in the word of

[31 : 25] Christ there's no such thing in all of the words of God in the New Testament as a true disciple who is born again and yet continues on for the rest of their lives saying I don't believe in Jesus anymore and sinning to their hearts content without ever repenting God's word leaves no room for that kind of a disciple of Jesus if God's spirit lives in a person they cannot they will not turn away or leave forever so if you see someone or know someone who has professed Christ in the past and they are floundering spiritually right now what should we do I want to give us five ways that we can help people in that situation five things number one don't assume automatically that it's because they were never a true disciple of

Jesus it could be that like countless people of faith in the past they've chosen to turn away or disobey for a time for a season but that the loving discipline of God will bring them back in due time as his spirit works in their hearts it happened to King David when he sinned it happened to Peter when he denied Christ and so don't assume automatically that it's because they were never a true disciple of Jesus number two don't assume automatically that they always have been a true disciple of Jesus just because they prayed the prayer and came to church and were baptized and have lived as Christians are supposed to live for a while yes there are people who have done all these things but then walked away from Jesus permanently never to return there are examples of this in the scripture as well people who started out among the people of

God and lived faithfully it seemed and then eventually they left they ended their lives in utter rebellion against God and against Christ and so don't assume automatically that they always have been a true disciple of Jesus just because they prayed the prayer and came to church and lived as a Christian is supposed to live for a while number three so what should we do pray for these people these people who are spiritually floundering in your life pray for them God knows the truth of what's going on in their hearts right now it doesn't matter if you don't he knows what you're asking for when you ask him to save them or to bring them back pray for them and I want to encourage you this morning to pray in faith that God really can save them and change their hearts not this kind of prayer where you know it's like make it possible

God but ultimately I know it's up to them no pray like Paul prayed my heart's desire and my prayer he said to the Romans is for the Israelites is that they might be saved God would you save them wherever they're at spiritually God is mighty to save he can harden the human heart in judgment and he can soften the human heart in mercy pray that he would be merciful to those people in your life that you know are spiritually floundering number four go talk to those people in your life who are floundering sometimes we don't want to do that you know that conversation might be uncomfortable and maybe some of us have done it and we've had the conversation but I want to encourage you go talk to those people again and again initiate conversations with them ask them how they're doing listen to what they say and try to meet them where they're at with words of encouragement my mind goes back to those words from

Hebrews chapter 3 verse 12 see to it brothers and sisters that none of you has a sinful unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God but encourage one another daily as long as it is called today so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness we have come to share in Christ if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the end and so initiate those conversations seek to encourage those people it might mean that you try to help them see maybe God is at work in your life for good even though you don't think he is or maybe it means that you humbly and graciously give him a warning like this one say I see you going down a path away from God and it's breaking my heart what's going on number five don't give people who are floundering like this the impression that they're okay and that you're okay with it living in persistent sin is one of the most dangerous places to be unbelief is spiritually dangerous and

[37 : 12] I'm going to point you to one passage Hebrews 10 26 if we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth no sacrifice for sins is left but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses so five things don't assume automatically that it's because they were never a true disciple of

Jesus don't assume automatically that they always have been a true disciple of Jesus pray for these people talk to these people to encourage them and don't give them the impression that they're okay in that place forever so in closing may the Lord Jesus have the deepest faith of your heart the deepest faith of your heart and mine and may he give us wisdom and courage to know how to help those of our friends co-workers neighbors family who are spiritually floundering let's pray Lord Jesus these are tough words they get us thinking about heaven and hell they get us thinking about people we love help us Lord help us to hold fast to you each one of us here in this room and make us people who help others you know each person that we know that we wish was walking closely with you and they're not

I pray that you would give us words for them even this week that you would show us how we can reach out to them we ask this in Jesus name amen and you you