

Introduction:

“A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher” (**Luke 6:40**, ESV). In context, Jesus is pointing out if we pick a bad teacher, we won’t be able to rise above it. When we follow the blind, we fall into the ditch with them. However, this principle also applies if we pick a good teacher. In fact, if we pick the Good Teacher, when we are fully trained, we will be just like Him. That is what discipleship is all about: being like Jesus. In fact, the term “Christian” got started because it means “little Christ.” It stands to reason then; our enemy is doing everything he can to keep us from being “little Christs.” However, we must not believe his only attempt or even his biggest goal is to get us to be anti-Christ. Certainly, if he can get us to be anti-Christ completely, he’ll be happy with that. However, the enemy’s most dangerous ploy is to simply get us to be almost-Christ, to make us satisfied with being almost a disciple. In fact, Jesus once had an encounter with a young man with whom Satan was successful, at least as far as what is revealed for us. We often refer to this fellow as the rich, young ruler. Perhaps we should call him the “almost a disciple.” We read the accounts in **Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-23**. Let’s hold this man up as a mirror not because we must be perfect disciples to be saved, but because we need to examine our hearts fearlessly and thoroughly to see if we are truly devoted to Jesus or only almost a disciple.

Discussion:

An Almost Disciple...

- I. ...almost honors God: Honors God among other gods.
 - A. We know a disciple honors God. As Jesus responded to Satan when He was tempted in **Matthew 4:10**, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (ESV). Clearly, if someone goes after idols and abandons worshiping Yahweh altogether, that person is not a disciple. The enemy has won another soul. However, that isn’t really what is happening with this young ruler. He isn’t abandoning Yahweh altogether.
 - B. I have always been intrigued by the list of commandments Jesus sets before the ruler. Jesus referred to five of the commandments about man’s relationship with other men. From **Exodus 20:12-17**, Jesus reminded the ruler he was not to commit adultery, murder, steal, or bear false witness, and he must honor his father and mother. The ruler claims, “All these I have kept from my youth.” But what about the other five commandments? What about no other gods, no graven images, taking the Lord’s name in vain, keeping the Sabbath, and avoiding coveting? Had the ruler kept those? Was the ruler being a stickler, was he saying in his mind, “I sure am glad Jesus didn’t mention that one about the graven images”? Surely not. Jesus is treating this list as representative, not exhaustive. That is, the ruler knew Jesus wasn’t giving him five commandments out of the list as the non-negotiables. He knew Jesus was simply using these to remind him of the whole list. The young man believed he had kept the Law.
 - C. Jesus, however, knew the truth. Despite what this man claimed and even believed, he had not kept the Law. In fact, the ruler had violated one very important command, the very first command. “You shall have no other gods before me” (**Exodus 20:3**). The ruler had a god that was keeping him from following Yahweh completely. He had a god that caused him to turn away from Jesus in sadness rather than following him with complete allegiance. The ruler was trying to serve God and money at the same time. Just as Jesus had taught in the Sermon on the Mount, he couldn’t do it (**Matthew 6:24**).
 - D. Satan doesn’t have to get us to abandon God. In fact, he may not even try. All he has to do is get us to only almost honor God. He can just get us to honor the one, true God in our own little pantheon. Maybe we put money, family, pleasure, fame, work, education, sexuality, and on the list goes right there alongside God, competing with Him, edging Him off the throne. We still come to church. We still sing songs. We still do a lot of what God says. We say to whoever challenges us, “Oh, I’ve kept those laws since I was a kid.” But still, we only love Him with almost all our heart, soul, mind, and might.
- II. ...almost learns from God: Learns from God when His teaching is convenient.
 - A. We know disciples learn from God. A disciple listens to and then does whatever God says. As Jesus taught in **Matthew 7:24-27**, we need to be like the wise man, building his house upon the rock by hearing Jesus’s

words and doing them. Clearly, if someone quits listening entirely, that person is not a disciple. Satan has won another soul. However, that isn't exactly what happened with the ruler. He still listened. He still asked questions. He still came to Jesus to get instruction.

- B. In fact, he called Jesus, "Good Teacher." However, Jesus responded, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone" (**Luke 18:19**, ESV). Jesus is not questioning His own deity, as some suppose. Rather, He is expressing His goodness and His Godhood. The ruler doesn't realize what he is confessing. If he thinks Jesus is truly a good teacher, the ruler must at the very least believe Jesus is from God. Jesus can't be a good teacher apart from God. The ruler simply thought of Jesus as a good man, a man whose teachings were worthy of great consideration. Jesus wanted the ruler to realize he wasn't talking to one good teacher among many. He was talking to the only "good Teacher." His words were not advice, they were God-given directives.
- C. The rich, young ruler was almost a disciple. He almost learned from God. He actually listened. Further, he was willing to submit to some of what Jesus said. For instance, when He said to avoid adultery, murder, and theft. However, when the teaching became inconvenient, when it meant giving up all his money, he went away sad. What kind of excuses did he make in his mind to ignore what Jesus had said? "Surely, God would never expect that?" And that is the problem for many today. Isn't it? So many of us are willing to listen to Jesus when His teaching corresponds with what we wanted to do anyway. We even are willing to make some sacrifices as long as they make sense to us. As long as they aren't too sacrificial, too inconvenient. "Okay, okay. I'll give up my mistress. But stay married to my wife with whom I've fallen out of love? Stay married to my wife who is mean to me? I just can't believe God would ever ask that of me." "I mean, I want to serve Jesus as much as the next person, but let's not get too extreme here." Like the foolish man in **Matthew 7:24-27**, he did listen to Jesus, but decided to still build at least part of his house on sand.

III. ...almost loves like God: Loves like God when it doesn't cost too much.

- A. We know disciples love like God. As Jesus taught, the world will know we are His disciples when we love one another the way He loves us (**John 13:34-35**). Clearly, if we hate and actively hurt one another or anyone, for that matter, we are not disciples. Satan has won another soul. However, that isn't what is happening with the ruler. He didn't hate people. He didn't steal from them. He didn't cheat them. He didn't covet their stuff. He didn't kill them. So, he loved them, right?
- B. Love is not merely the absence of hate. Love is the presence of sacrifice. Love is the presence of seeking the best of others. Love is the presence of considering others as more significant than self. Love is following the greatest commands, loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind, but also loving our neighbors as ourselves, especially those of the household of God. Interestingly, in Matthew's account, Jesus specifically mentioned the second greatest command as one of the commands the man was to have followed (**Matthew 19:19**). The ruler claimed he had kept that one too.
- C. Yet, Jesus told the ruler he lacked one thing. When He did, He not only highlighted that the man didn't love God with his entire being, He also challenged him to love people more than his money. Jesus instructed him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." That mention of "perfect" takes us back to **Matthew 5:43-48**. We are to be perfect as our Father is, loving others as He loves them. Jesus challenged the ruler to love people like that. The ruler, instead of falling on his face and begging for mercy realizing that the standard was too high for him, went away sad.
- D. Interestingly, the ruler claimed he did love his neighbor. He had always done that. Surely, the ruler wasn't boasting frivolously. No doubt, he had acted in love toward others. But give it all away? Love his neighbor more than he loved his money? No way. The cost was just too high. There must be an easier way. He almost loved like God did. He was almost a disciple. But not quite.

IV. ...almost leads others to God: Leads others to religious self-righteousness.

- A. This is the most complex of the points on our circle. Be patient with me as I strive to show the point here.
- B. We know a disciple leads others to God. A disciple knows life, that is, righteousness and salvation, only comes from Jesus. A disciple leads others to Jesus to gain life. Certainly, if people declare they don't need life from Jesus, they don't need righteousness from Jesus, they don't need salvation from Jesus, they aren't disciples. Satan has won more souls. However, that isn't quite what is happening with the ruler. He knows life is connected to Jesus somehow. But he doesn't quite get there and anyone following him won't quite get there.
- C. Please, for a moment think through with me what Jesus is actually trying to get the ruler to grasp. The ruler runs up to Jesus and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus's first response is "Keep the commandments." Now think about that. Having heard that, what should the ruler have responded? We know what **Romans 3:23** says: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (ESV). We know what **James**

2:10 says, “If anyone keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (ESV). The ruler, of course, didn’t have the benefit of those verses, but he should have grasped those concepts. If he was going to get eternal life based on what he did, he had to keep the commandments. There is no way he had done that. His response should have been very much like Peter’s in **Luke 5:8**, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (ESV). His response should have been like the tax collector of **Luke 18:13**, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (ESV). But instead, the man says, “All these I have kept. What do I still lack?” (**Matthew 19:20**, ESV). That is, “What else do I need to do?”

- D. Therefore, Jesus takes another stab at helping the ruler see the truth. “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (**Matthew 19:21**, ESV). We already hinted at this in our point about the disciple’s love. In Matthew’s gospel, this connection of “perfect” with storing up treasure in heaven takes us back to **Matthew 5:48**: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (ESV). Sadly, in all honesty we often miss the point of these passages today because we make the same mistake as the ruler. We are trying to figure out how we are going to get ourselves to eternal life. We hear Jesus say, “Go, be perfect.” We all know that standard is too high. So we start trying to fiddle with the definition of the word translated “perfect.” We know that word can mean “whole” or “complete” or “mature.” For some reason, that sounds less daunting. I mean, I can’t be perfect, but I can be mature. So that must be what Jesus was talking about, right? Yet, Jesus’s standard of perfection, wholeness, completeness, maturity is the Father. The standard is simply too high. In the Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew 5:48**, the purpose is to actually force us back to the very first statements in the Sermon: “Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the meek...Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”
- E. When Jesus told the ruler to sell all his possessions and give them to the poor, Jesus wasn’t trying to establish a rule of conduct by which the ruler could gain life for himself. Here’s how I know that. If we look at Luke’s account of this in **Luke 18:18-30** and then keep reading for just a few more paragraphs, we get to the account of Zacchaeus in **Luke 19:1-10**. Did Zacchaeus sell all he had and give it to the poor? No, he says, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor.” Did Jesus say, “Zacchaeus, that isn’t good enough. If you want life, the rule to follow is all your goods”? Nope. He says, “Today salvation has come to this house.” So, if Jesus wasn’t trying to tell the ruler about the code of conduct or rules of righteousness that would get him eternal life, what was Jesus trying to tell the ruler? He was trying to get the ruler to see his basis for getting eternal life was all wrong. The ruler wanted to know how he could get himself to eternal life. Jesus’s point was to see it was impossible for the ruler to get himself to eternal life. In fact, isn’t this the point Jesus made to the apostles afterwards when they were also scratching their heads as to how this would all work. They asked, “Then who can be saved?” and Jesus responded, “What is impossible with men is possible with God” (**Luke 18:26-27**). Jesus was trying to lead the ruler to realize what he needed was a poverty of spirit that doesn’t come to Jesus saying, “What do I do to get life?” Rather, it comes to Jesus, “Please, be merciful to me. I deserve death. Give me life.” The ruler went away sad, but not mourning. He would not be comforted because he would not fall on His face before Jesus as the only one who could give him mercy.
- F. And with this we grasp what the almost disciple does. The disciple leads people to Jesus for mercy and life. The almost disciple leads people to a religious self-righteousness. The almost disciple leads people to a set of rules, morals, conduct codes. Please, don’t misunderstand. The disciple doesn’t say, “I’m saved by the mercy and grace of Jesus; it doesn’t matter how I behave.” Not at all. After all, the disciple is hungering and thirsting for righteousness. But the disciple understands we can’t do enough to get ourselves to eternal life. The cost is more than we can pay. Jesus had to pay that price. And He did. Praise the Lord!
- V. ...almost abides in God’s Word: Abiding in God’s Word until it contradicts personal preference.
- A. Disciples abide in God’s Word. Whether disciples honor God, learn from God, love like God, or lead others to God, they do it with the Word of God as their guide. Certainly, if someone completely dismisses God’s Word, they are no longer a disciple. Satan has won another soul. But that isn’t exactly what the ruler did.
- B. The ruler lived by God’s Word some of the time. However, he certainly wasn’t a **Psalms 19** kind of disciple was he. David spoke of God’s Word and said, “More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold” (**Psalms 19:10**). But what did the ruler prefer? His money. And this gets to the point doesn’t it. The ruler was willing to abide in God’s word when it came to adultery, murder, theft, etc. But when God spoke the word to him about selling his possessions, that crossed a line. That went too far.
- C. Really, there isn’t much to say about this one. It sums up and reminds us of each of the previous points. If I prefer my ways to honor God rather than what I can find authorized in His Word, if I prefer my opinions or your opinions over what I learn in God’s Word, if I prefer my definition and expressions of love over what

God demonstrates in His Word, or if I prefer my set of religious rules to Jesus, I may be abiding in God's Word sometimes, but I am only almost abiding in God's Word. And, frankly, almost abiding there is not actually abiding there at all. The fact is, when I only abide in God's Word in the places where God's Word corresponds with my preferences, I'm actually not abiding in God's Word, am I?

Conclusion:

As we wrap up, please don't misunderstand the point of this sermon. Disciples struggle, stumble, and fall. We aren't perfect, sinless disciples. In fact, that is the reason we have become disciples, because we recognize our imperfection. We recognize our sin. We, like Peter, know that all things being equal Jesus should simply abandon us because we are sinful people. Yet, Jesus died to give us life. Jesus paid the price. He gave up everything to give us salvation. It is impossible for us. But it is possible for Him. Therefore, we come to Him, seeking mercy from Him, and handing our allegiance and our lives over to Him. We don't want to follow from a distance. We don't want to keep Him at arm's length. We don't want to simply be near Him. We don't want to be almost a disciple. We want to be disciples. We don't turn away sad like the ruler. Instead, we fall down at His feet, mourning. And He will comfort us. Praise the Lord! Where are you on this spectrum of discipleship?