

I Peter 1:13-16 Characteristics of a Christian Disciple

Introduction

In the autumn of 2014 we had a Sunday morning series on issues of Christian discipleship, this message was intended to conclude that series before starting a new one next Sunday. You may have seen an amusing car sticker some years ago that contained the message: 'Don't follow me, I'm lost!' It was genuinely funny and intended to be so, but I am convinced that too many people today are following role models who are genuinely confused about the way they ought to be living. At one level it is obvious that we cannot expect people with no belief in God or association with the Christian Church, necessarily, to live a life consistent with Christian moral values. However, neither should we go to the other extreme and assume that because our convictions on many subjects are no longer a given in the wider society that there will not be occasions that actions taken there reflect Christian values and principles. A good example of the latter was the behaviour of many local people in Glasgow after the tragedy of the bin-lorry going out of control outside Queen Street Station in December 2014. Their exemplary conduct, as far as I am aware, reflected very well on a city whose historical motto was: 'Let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of Thy Word and the Praising of Thy Name.' In the late nineteenth century the proportion of Christians in Glasgow was reputed to be as high as in any comparable-sized city in the world. However, given that the majority of the population is rarely in a place of worship to hear God's Word expounded, the only Bible they will read are the lives of the followers of Jesus around whom they may work or socialise. The question comes home to us very clearly: What message are you and I communicating to the people around us by the way in which we live our lives day by day?

In I Peter 1:13-16 the apostle Peter lists some of the characteristics that mark the life of a follower of Jesus. He was commending these convictions to Turkish believers who were young in the faith and in newly planted congregations across a wide area within that country. Peter has previously spoken about the wonder of the gospel in this chapter and will later go on to speak about the cost and preciousness of what Jesus did for us on the cross. However, here he takes the time to advise these new Christians that our profession of faith has practical implications for our daily lives. We need to grasp that all the things we believe about our faith have a practical outworking and vice versa that the lifestyle we lead has a doctrinal foundation on which it is based. There are people in our society who practise a lifestyle that is entirely consistent with Christian convictions and we honour them for it, even though they may not share our faith. However, it should be a real concern to us that there are people who profess with their words to be followers of Jesus yet live in a manner that calls into question their claims. The gospel is harmed when such examples are observed in our community. All of us make mistakes at times and fail to live up to the high standards we profess and need to apologise to other people, however, that is not the issue, what is a real problem is a settled wilful departure from a way of life that is honouring to God and the negative impact such choices have on other people in a family or other social context.

What kind of things does Peter raise in this section of his first letter? How should a follower of Jesus live out their faith in the wider community? It appears fairly clearly that there are five characteristics displayed in this section of the letter.

1. **Be Prepared** (I Peter 1:13a) *Therefore, prepare your minds for action...*

Ready! Steady! Go! Or On Your Marks, Get Set, Go! Whatever the contest the initial words mentioned here indicate that a group of people are prepare to engage in some competitive

activity. They are being invited to put all other thoughts out of their minds as a race or competition of some kind is about to begin. At that point anything that could hinder their progress in this activity needs to be banished from view. The literal image of Peter's day is of a person tucking into their belt the longer flowing robes they were wearing so that they could run or walk fast without being impeded. The guidance Peter is about to give is not a list of rules to keep in order to be saved. Instead, in the light of this glorious gospel which has saved us and gives us such hope for the future we ought to live in a way that reflects what God has done and is doing in our lives. This is why Peter first began with an explanation of the wonderful good news of God's salvation given to us through the sacrifice of Jesus in our place, and applied to and in our lives by *the sanctifying work of the [Holy] Spirit* (I Peter 1:2). It is He who will equip and enable us to become more like Jesus so that however faint His image and likeness is in us just now it will become more visible as we draw closer to our eternal home-call. His letter was written to Christians who knew that Jesus had died in their place on the cross and who were rejoicing in the wonderful good news that they had been welcomed into God's family for eternity. Do you rejoice in this truth as well? We know it in our heads but may it always be a lot more than simply a mental ascent to factual information. It should bring about great rejoicing and celebration as Peter showed in I Peter 1:3-5: ***Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you,⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*** How often do you stop to thank and praise God for His wonderful gift of salvation with real joy in your heart? It ought to be a never-ending series of offerings of praise and worship to our great God and Saviour –because if God through Jesus has invested in my life to this extent then I can have confidence that He will enable me to come through all the challenges I face in His strength. As a result I want to be always ready to serve the Lord and live for Him in the way I live my life at home, at work and in every other social context.

The battle for what you and I do occurs primarily in our minds. When we see someone act in a manner that is inappropriate or we hear words come from a person's mouth that ought not to have been spoken it is both sad and disappointing. However, the real sadness and disappointment is more fundamental than that. It is acknowledging that this individual has lost a battle in their mind first and foremost that otherwise might have been won and the wrong choices ruled out before they were incarnated as words or actions. James addresses this point in his earlier letter when he wrote: *When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone;¹⁴ but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters* (James 1:13-16). In other words this kind of failure need not happen if our minds are truly focussed on God and alert for the choices we need to make. Paul underlined it in I Corinthians 10:12-13 when he wrote: *So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!¹³ No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* In its context the apostle was warning the new Christians in Corinth that the Bible is full of examples of good, bad and indifferent moral choices by individuals with quite often the consequences of those choices spelled out in accounts of the history of the nation of Israel. The most encouraging point is this: If our minds are truly prepared for action and our hearts are centred on the Lord Jesus Christ then we need never fall into sin; we can be victorious over sinful thoughts and desires. This is not the same as saying we will be, but it is saying there is no excuse for resignation or despair.

The Christian who truly avails themselves of God's resources can live a victorious Christian life, in the midst of both encouraging or discouraging life circumstances, to the glory of God.

2. **Be Self-Controlled** (I Peter 1:13b) ...*be self-controlled*...

We are familiar with this term from the list of flavours of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:23. Paul's words there are very familiar, but worth hearing again: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,*²³ *gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*²⁴ *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*²⁵ *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*²⁶ *Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.* The previous command from Peter was a once-for-all time call to action as this is our permanent duty throughout our time here on earth. We are never 'off-duty' as a Christian. Here Peter uses a present active imperative form that places the full responsibility for action squarely on each one of us personally. Peter is not speaking here about inappropriate choices or things that are illegal in a civilised state, rather concerning things that are commendable when done appropriately, but potentially harmful when taken beyond sensible boundaries. A disciple of Jesus will seek to have mastery over their desires and choices in each area of their life. From sensible habits of what we eat and drink; taking appropriate exercise and care of our health; regulating the amount of hours and degree of priority we give to work; working out appropriate quality interaction family and friends; reserving time for personal devotions of prayer and Bible reading, together with gathering with God's people at church on Sundays and our service for Him as appropriate each week. For the vast majority of us with busy lives the only way we can bring any coherence to our schedules is by disciplined planning and the use of a diary or some other equivalent planner. God created us in His image. One aspect of that is the ability given to each one of us both to make choices and decisions and to experience a sense of purpose and fulfilment in life as we mark it with successes and attainments from our earliest days. For a younger child learning to walk and talk; learning to swim or ride a bike, together with differing levels of attainment in education hopefully sets us up for adult life. The diversity of possible accomplishments for adults must be noted, but while we have different degrees of talents and gifting, all of us have something to contribute to both society and the work of the Christian Church. Peter urges these Christians to maximise the potential within each one of them for their good and for the glory of God.

Peter also uses this term in I Peter 5:7-9: ***Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.***⁹ *Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.* Why is this emphasis included? It is because all of us at some time in our personal or professional lives will be tempted to do actual wrong things. The pressure to give in because 'everyone else is doing it'; or because it would make life easier for us to fit in with certain people or possibly help us advance in our career may be very serious. At such times we need God's help to make the right choices and take if need be the lonely path of integrity when others are walking the other way. The words of Moses spoken to the Israelites more than three thousand years ago in Deuteronomy 10:12-13 are still as relevant today as they were when first spoken. *And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to Him, to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul,*¹³ *and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?* Do we revere God sufficiently to be as self-controlled in our choices as we should in each area of our lives? Or do we need the Holy Spirit to help us make progress in something that He is bringing to our attention maybe even today?

3. **Be Focussed** (I Peter 1:13c) *set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at His coming.*

Some days at work in even the best environments are less than thrilling, but they don't last forever. Time can pass much more quickly than we realise. The tiny baby you once held in your arms may before you imagine be looking you in the eye as a young adult on the verge of full responsibility for their own future, as each one of us did a generation earlier. Every person alive has twenty-four hours in their day, seven days in their week and fifty-two weeks in their year. However, a focussed person will accomplish so much more than another who drifts through it. It never happens by chance. What is it that motivates a Christian to give of their best each year? Peter suggests here that it is knowing that Jesus is coming back soon. This truth is highlighted in a number of bible passages to ensure that we get this message loud and clear and are not distracted by competing voices clamouring for our attention. In Luke 12:35-48 Jesus made this point with utmost clarity. *'Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, ³⁶ like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. ³⁷ It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will make them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. ³⁸ It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or towards daybreak. ³⁹ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him.'* At the beginning of another year do you make any time to reflect on the choices you made in the previous year and how you might do better in the New Year to come? It might for some people be a reminder that they have done very well and keeping up the good work is the right conclusion. However, for other people there may be areas of their lives where they need to put in extra effort to improve things. One thing the Bible is clear on - procrastination is off the agenda! If Jesus is coming soon I need to be wise in the way I live my life. There is a personal element to this self-discipline as John highlights in I John 3:2-3: *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that **when Christ appears**, we shall be like Him, for we shall see him as He is. ³ **All who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure.*** There is also a collective aspect to this focus in relation to our interaction with other people. Peter mentions this theme again in its social context in I Peter 4:7-11: ***The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all love each another deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹ Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰ Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. ¹¹ If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*** The purpose as always is to glorify the One whom we serve as His followers. How is your focus just now? Does it need to be sharpened?

4. **Be Obedient** (I Peter 1:14) *As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.*

How do we know that a parent loves a child and cares for them appropriately? It is because they have taken the time and effort to train them in basic behavioural and social skills. We teach our young ones road-safety, for example, not because we are kill-joys but because we know that every year too many people lose their lives because a pedestrian or a vehicle driver had lost concentration on or near a busy road. A responsible parent will endeavour to the best of their ability to encourage their children to do their best with school work and

support them as appropriate when homework needs to be done! Christian parents should also seek to guide their children in daily time for prayer and reading and reflecting on God's Word. It may be a very short time, but it sets a framework for our lives and that of our children which together with our collective witness and worship on Sundays ensures that we seek to offer a biblical perspective on the issues of daily life. If you need help or advice regarding Daily Bible reading notes that are available for different age groups please drop into the CLC Bookshop in town as there are good resources you can acquire for both children, teenagers and adults. In Hebrews 12:4-11 the author highlights this aspect of Christian living. *In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.* ⁵ *And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you,* ⁶ *because the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and He chastens everyone He accepts as His son.'* ⁷ *Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as His children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?* ⁸ *If you are not disciplined – and everyone undergoes discipline – then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all.* ⁹ *Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live!* ¹⁰ *They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, **in order that we may share in His holiness.*** ¹¹ *No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.* In the days leading up to Christmas I had the pleasure of attending the Christmas concert put on by Grove Academy each December. It was as always a wonderful display of talent by young people from that school as a large number of pupils displaying their vocal or musical talents. However, did they randomly show up and volunteer to sing or play a given instrument or style by chance? Certainly Not! Hours and hours of practice over years of training in obedience to the requests of music tutors or teachers and encouragement from parents at home, together with the desire and self-discipline of the students had produced those wonderful accomplishments. In each of those individuals there would have been times when they didn't want to practice and in some cases possibly considered quitting their instruments, but they overcame that temptation and reaped the rewards. However, Peter is speaking here of more fundamental choices in life. Does God have first place in my life? Am I in an area of my life being selfish and not considering the legitimate needs of someone else as fully as I should? Am I making choices that are actually morally wrong in preference to more wholesome and God-honouring ones. In the latter case the temptations on social media to access material that is inappropriate, for example, is causing serious harm to a significant proportion of the population, even if only a fraction of that number are at risk of prosecution for their choices. Obedient children of the King of Kings will want to scrutinise their desires and choices and ask ourselves am I being wise in the choices I am making? It may be that someone here needs help to get back on track because of wrong choices they have made. If that is you –don't put off getting the help and support you need. Acknowledging that we have a problem is the first big step on the way to solving it. We need to know and be honest with ourselves about how we are getting on and if there are issues over which we need help to have the courage to ask people who can help us make the right choices for the future. Do you need to do that today?

5. **Be Holy** (I Peter 1:15-16) ¹⁵ *But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;* ¹⁶ *for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'*

Our calling as Christians to develop good attitudes and thought patterns; wholesome and constructive speech from our mouths and modelling appropriate behaviour has one ultimate goal –to be like Jesus. We need to be very clear that our eyes are to be fixed on Jesus, our

example and role model, not on other people when setting our personal standards. Our sinful human nature prompts us to compare ourselves with individuals who have made less progress in following God's way so as to give us an excuse for not giving our best for God. However, our calling is to set the highest standards, inspired by significant people from the past possibly; certainly encouraged by good role models in the present; with a view to inviting others to join us in making more progress in becoming like Jesus. In 1961 Yehiel Dinur, a concentration camp survivor who had testified at the Nuremberg trials testified again at the trial of one of the key Nazi architects of the Shoah (the preferred term to Jewish people rather than 'Holocaust'). It was an extremely difficult day for Dinur as he walked into the court room to come face to face with the man who had sent him to Auschwitz eighteen years earlier. 'Dinur began to sob uncontrollably, then fainted, collapsing in a heap on the floor as the presiding judicial officer pounded his gavel for order in the crowded courtroom. Was Dinur overcome by hatred? Fear? Horrid memories? No! it was none of these. Rather, as Dinur explained [later to an American television interviewer Mike Wallace] to Wallace, all at once he realised Eichmann was not the godlike army officer who had sent so many to their deaths. This Eichmann was an ordinary man. 'I was afraid about myself,' said Dinur, 'I saw that I am capable to do this. I am...exactly like him.' [Charles Colson, *Who Speaks for God?* p. 137]

Peter's mind may have gone back to one of his earliest encounters with Jesus after the start of his public ministry in Galilee. It was an occasion when Jesus contrary to received wisdom advised a group of fishermen to endeavour to catch a harvest of fish at the wrong time of the day. Luke 5:6-9 gives the details. *When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. ⁷ So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. ⁸ When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!'* ⁹ *For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, ¹⁰ and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.* God's plan for us is not to stay as we are but to be like His son Jesus. Romans 8:29 reminds us: *For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.* Or as Paul puts it in II Corinthians 3:18b: *And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.* It is a fact of life that children do copy the sayings and mannerisms of their parents, often quite unintentionally. Other people can at times find it interesting or on occasions amusing. It has come about because of the time spent together that the younger individual has become like the older one in some respects. Peter is suggesting that with respect to Christian disciples, significant progress will have been made when people see Jesus-like characteristics in the lives of His followers. One day in heaven we will be just like Him in our holy attitudes and aspirations; our speech and our conduct! In Acts 4:13 Luke records that officials in Jerusalem who were hostile to the newly-formed Christian Church, had to admit this of Peter and John after interrogating them. *They were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.* This is the ultimate complement that anyone can pay to a Christian. Let us ask the Lord by His Spirit to give us a real passion this year to want to be like Him in the choices we make so that we by its end are reflecting more clearly the image of our Lord and Saviour, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

