

The Illustrated DISCIPLE

If I close my eyes, I can still see his upturned face.

Scott was a new Christian. Fresh from alcohol and cynicism, he'd recently turned to Christ for answers. Each Sunday, he sat with open Bible and eager expression, waiting for me to teach him the ABCs of following Jesus. And each Sunday, he left disappointed. He wouldn't say it in words. But week after week, I watched his eyes glaze over, his Bible slowly close, and the expectant

expression fade from his face.

Oh, I had the MNOs of discipleship down cold. I could teach Scott the XYZs. I could expound on the minor prophets and discuss differing views on the Second Coming.

But somewhere along the way, I'd forgotten what it was like to be a "newbie" in Christ . . . how daunting discipleship could seem . . . how overwhelming it all could be.

Then one Sunday I began a

series on the Beatitudes. I watched Scott listen—riveted to these simple words from Jesus. I saw him writing frantically in the margin of his Bible, whispering urgently to his wife, sitting quietly in his seat long after we dismissed. He bought the tapes. He came by the office to ask questions. He wanted a reading list.

Call me slow. But it took me a while to realize that Scott—so eager to grow in Christ, so willing to follow

NEWBIE

A newcomer, especially an inexperienced user of the Internet or of computers in general.

—Webster's Collegiate Dictionary

where Jesus would lead—didn't know where to begin. Until he heard the Beatitudes.

A PLACE TO START

We're drowning in words about following Jesus. Walk into a Christian bookstore and chances are you'll feel swamped. The flood of information about discipleship coming from books, pulpits, Christian television, and radio is astounding . . . and bewildering. But how many of these words can be trusted? How many of these words are really necessary? And just how many of these words must we read before we really learn?

In the face of this informational tidal wave, many Christians (new and old) want to shout some simple questions: "Where do I start as a disciple of Jesus?" "What steps are necessary to become what he wants me to be?" "Are there any straightforward instructions on following Jesus?"

What we need is a guide for discipleship—something

short, sweet, and to the point. We need something to help us troubleshoot our lives when things go wrong, something we can review over the years to get back in touch with the basics.

But my guess is that you didn't get one when you became a Christian. It's not that you mislaid it along the way or ran it through the wash. They never gave you one. How do you like that? The most important commitment of your life and no user's manual to go along with it!

We have instruction manuals and guidebooks for everything—except the things we need them for most. I have a booklet filled with detailed directions for unstopping my garbage disposal. But no one gave me an instruction manual that tells me how to build character in my kids. I'd gladly trade the manual about my lawnmower or the one that came with my wash-dry machine for some simple directions on what to say

to a wife whose feelings I've wounded. I'd be willing to have my VCR flash "12:00" for the rest of its natural life if I could exchange its instruction booklet for clear instructions on what to do with a friendship that's gone sour or a neighbor who won't mow his yard or in-laws who stay too long.

As it is, I have a drawer full of instruction manuals for things I couldn't care less about and a life full of things I care about with no instructions to go with them.

It's at this point in the discussion that some well-meaning Christian throws a Bible at us and says, "Here, just read this!" Hmmm . . . thanks for the sentiment, but that's not very helpful. I open my Bible of more than a thousand pages and feel lost. How much do I need to master before I can figure out the basics? Do I need to know about the tabernacle or decipher Revelation or grasp the finer points of redemptive history before I can walk

THE MAKING OF MANY BOOKS

More than 25,000 new religious books have been published in the last ten years. More than 155 million copies of books related to religion were bought by Americans in 1995.

—Publisher's Weekly

FOREVER 12:00

It's estimated that between 20 percent and 35 percent of VCR owners don't know how to set the digital clocks on their machines.

—Bradley University

confidently in the footsteps of Jesus? The Bible is wonderful, but it's long. It has rich nuggets about following Jesus, but you have to do a lot of digging to get to the gold.

Forgive me for insisting I need something shorter, something more direct and to the point. Give me something I can get my arms around *right now*. Don't make me start with Leviticus and Ezekiel and Hebrews to find out how to be the disciple God wants me to be. Give me something that covers the basics, something simple and specific, something I can write on a three-by-five index card.

Do that for me, and maybe—just maybe—I can begin to be a disciple of Jesus.

JESUS, THE APOSTLES, AND FIRST WORDS

[Jesus] went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. . . .

—MATTHEW 5:1-2

The men Jesus chose as disciples sat around him with expectant expressions. Peter. John and James. Thomas. Andrew. Twelve of them altogether. They came from all walks of life. They brought all kinds of baggage. And they didn't have any more clue than the rest of us.

Just like us, they met Jesus and knew there was something special about him. They put their faith in him—faith enough to leave their old lives behind and begin new lives as followers of the prophet from Nazareth.

According to the gospel accounts, Jesus collected these individuals by wandering around Galilee, issuing the invitation, "Follow me." Peter and Andrew were fishing out in a boat when Jesus called over the water, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." The same challenge went out to James and John, and to Matthew Levi.

One by one, the disciples heard, left, and followed.

But they didn't know what they were doing. These were fishermen, not theologians. They were sincere, earnest Jews who went to the synagogue on the Sabbath and tried to make it to Jerusalem for the Passover. But they hadn't been to seminary. They hadn't poured over biblical texts preparing themselves to be followers of the Messiah. These were ordinary men with more expertise in boats and tax tables than in the ways of God.

If you think about it, Peter had to start somewhere. John had to learn the basics somehow. The apostles weren't popped out of a mold—ready-made and fully formed. Like us, they had to learn the ABCs of following Jesus.

They needed an instruction manual as badly as we do.

Jesus knew what they needed, of

FISH IN THE SEA OF GALILEE

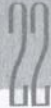
Damselfish, catfish, barbels, mouthbreeders (don't ask!), and (my personal favorite) scaleless blennies.

—Encyclopaedia Britannica

UNLUCKY 13

In the past, 12 was considered a perfect number, signifying harmony and completeness (like 7 and 40). But 13, in contrast, represented confusion and chaos. What really killed 13, however, was when someone calculated that at the Last Supper, Judas the Betrayer was the thirteenth person at the table.

—The Straight Dope



FIRST WORDS

Infants speak their first word at twelve to fourteen months.

Usually that word is a simple label for people, objects, or actions, such as "mommy," "go," or "milk." One of my son's first sentences: "I'm a vicious rhino."

course. He wanted his first words to them to meet that need. He'd prepared a guide of sorts to give them. But apparently it was important for these instructions to be delivered all at once. So Jesus waited until the first disciples were all together before telling them the basics about the business of being his followers.

If you read Matthew's and Luke's accounts, you'll hear a strange silence settle over the story between the call to follow and the Beatitudes. From their initial invitation until the entire group is gathered on a hillside in Galilee, there are no words just for the disciples. Instead Jesus spoke to a leper, the Pharisees, a paralytic, a critic or two, and a man with a shriveled hand. But, to the disciples, he uttered not a word.¹ It's as if Jesus avoided speaking to his chosen followers until all were present and he could address the entire group.

His opportunity came when he gathered the disciples on a mountainside.² Seating them around himself, Jesus spoke to the group for the first time. I like the way the *New International Version* translates it: "He *began* to teach them. . . ."³

First words are important. We proudly take note of the first words spoken by our children. The opening sentence of a book has greater significance than one tucked away on page 176. We invest inaugural addresses and commencement exercises with special significance.

Perhaps we should listen with extreme care to the first words of Jesus to his assembled disciples. These are the words that Jesus had been saving for just this moment, the words that would "baptize" these spiritual novices and initiate them into Christ's inner circle. They are defining words, christening words, formative words.

We call them the Beatitudes. But Jesus might call them his instruction manual for building disciples.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."⁴

Eight succinct sentences. Ninety-six simple words. Nothing you have to look up in a dictionary. Nothing that requires a graduate degree to understand. These lines are

lean, spare, elegant. There's no fat, no surplus here. They flow like poetry and cut like a knife.

We assume that words came easily to Jesus—spontaneously, effortlessly, just the right word for the right occasion. But not these words. There's nothing extemporaneous about the Beatitudes. He must have planned this first meeting with his disciples for years. I can see him rehearsing these words while still in the carpentry shop at Nazareth: "Peter, John, guys . . . I have something to tell you." Perhaps he honed this speech while sharpening his saws and chisels. I don't think these words were made up on the spot. Jesus knew exactly what he wanted to tell these men long before he called them together.

And what did he want to tell them? You might expect him to introduce himself.

Hello. My name is Jesus. I'm the Son of God, the Alpha and the Omega, the bright and morning star. You may have read about

me in the writings of Moses and the prophets.

Or you'd think he might start by giving them his mission statement: "I have come to seek and to save the lost." Or by letting them know what their mission was to be: "You are to be my witnesses." It wouldn't surprise us if he'd begun by telling them stories of the kingdom of heaven or giving them a preview of what the next three years would be like.

Instead, Jesus talked to his disciples not about himself, not about the mission, not about the kingdom. He talked to them about them. His first words described the characteristics he would look for in those who followed him. They described the kind of people he wanted his followers to become. They defined what it meant to be his disciple.

Now, *that's* interesting. If these words were intentionally foundational for his first disciples, perhaps they're intended to be foundational for us as

well. If they defined the followers of Jesus in the first century, maybe they do the same for followers of Jesus in the twenty-first century.

What we have in the Beatitudes is an instruction manual for discipleship—one that applies to all Christians. Eight basic directions for growing up in Christ. Eight steps to the heart of God. Eight powerful and compelling portraits of life lived as a follower of Jesus. The essence of discipleship in a thimble. The heart of Christianity in a paragraph that can be written on a postcard.

YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR

The only thing worse than having no instructions is being stuck with *bad* instructions. It's frustrating enough when you get faulty directions about trivial things. Try putting together a Christmas toy using an instruction manual written by someone whose first language isn't English: "Please to put plastic device green into snapping-on slot." That's really irritating.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR LIFE

Written instruction manuals for Christian life and faith have been popular since the beginning of Christianity. The Apostle's Creed is the earliest example. From the sixteenth century, these formal instructions were called catechisms, meaning teachings that were "sounded out."

—Encyclopaedia Britannica

Toys are one thing. But with some things there's no room for unclear or faulty instructions. We won't tolerate ambiguous directions on prescription bottles. Parachutes must come with *flawless* instructions. We have no patience with haphazard advice about caring for our children.

Yet Christians seem remarkably casual about the quality of instruction they receive for discipleship. Frequently, we're thrown into discipleship with little or no direction—the "sink or swim" school of disciplinemade. When we do receive instruction, it's often vague and unthinking—the "ignorance loves company" method of disciplinemade. Worst of all, some of the advice we're handed about discipleship is just plain wrong.

But why should that surprise us? Bad advice about discipleship has never been in short supply.

Some people in the first century insisted, "You must be

circumcised and obey the law of Moses to be a true disciple." That sounded good (except the circumcision part!) and persuaded many a Gentile Christian to become an observant Jew. But the apostle Paul called this advice a perversion of the gospel.⁵ You don't become the disciple Jesus wants you to be by cutting off parts of your anatomy and refusing to eat certain foods. Bad advice.

In the second century, a fellow by the name of Montanus told people they couldn't marry, had to take a vow of poverty, fast to the point of starvation, and seek martyrdom at every opportunity to be a real disciple of Jesus. Amazingly, he won enough followers to split churches throughout the Mediterranean world for the next 300 years. But he was wrong. Ascetics don't have a corner on the salvation market. He was handing out bad instructions about discipleship.

In the sixteenth century, a monk by the name of Tetzl said that if you made a sizable

contribution to the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the pope would permit you to engage in the sin of your choice and still remain a disciple in good standing. The massively expensive cathedral was built from the donations of people who listened to and believed what Tetzl said about discipleship. But Tetzl was wrong. That's not how disciples act. That's bad advice about how to follow Jesus.

Bad advice about discipleship is still abundant today.

There are people who insist that discipleship depends on what position you hold on the millennium or whether you speak in tongues or which political party you belong to. They'll tell you that the way to discipleship is secret or obscure or esoteric. They'll make you jump through hoops and walk on coals and embark on quests for the Holy Grail. They'll try to convince you that discipleship is about conformity or doctrinal correctness or moral perfection. They'll ask you to focus on behaviors or positions

or rituals. They'll make instructions about discipleship complicated and detailed and exhaustive.

They'll be very sincere, very earnest, and very wrong.

Not everything people say about discipleship is helpful. Not everything we're told about following Jesus is worth listening to. Not every word on the subject is the gospel truth. So be careful. There's a lot of bad advice out there. Insist on the genuine article. Make sure your instruction manual reads, "Written in heaven." Accept no substitutes.

RIGHT FROM THE MASTER'S MOUTH

As it happens, Jesus himself has something to say about becoming his disciple. Above the hubbub of the religious pied pipers, we can hear his quiet words—if we listen carefully.

The Beatitudes are Christ's instruction manual for building a disciple. In them, he describes eight steps to becoming the Christian you always

wanted to be. They won't make your hair grow back or help you take off that extra twenty pounds. They won't improve your golf handicap or make you a safer driver. They won't even teach you how to program your VCR.

What they will do is change your life. They'll teach you the most important skills for facing your most challenging spiritual problem—yourself. They'll identify the attitudes necessary for living in the presence of God. They'll educate you in the ways disciples live and deal with other people. They'll help you manage your most intimate relationships.

These aren't just thoughtless soundbites, tossed off by Jesus to warm up his audience before getting to the meat of his sermon. These are the foundation points—key characteristics—for people who want to walk in his footsteps. With eight sure strokes, Jesus paints the portrait of a true believer.

That's what Jesus was doing on the mountainside

that day. He was presenting an instruction manual for disciples. Before things got too hectic, before the Pharisees got their noses out of joint, before the mobs began to press and make their demands, Jesus took a few moments to lay out the ground rules for those who wanted to follow him.

Because Matthew records these words, we can look over the shoulders of the Twelve and listen in as Jesus tells them about life as a disciple. As we eavesdrop on this conversation, we learn not just *who they* were to become but *who God* wants *us* to become. The words Jesus spoke so long ago become marching orders for those of us who want to be his modern-day followers.

These eight Beatitudes—spoken on a desert mountainside in an isolated portion of an obscure country by a callous-handed carpenter to a group of nobodies—have impacted more people than any words ever spoken. What Jesus