

Exodus 18:13-26 • The Old Testament Roots of Discipleship

Introduction

Just in case it was never pointed out, the Great Commission Christ gave commands, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations”. (Matthew 28:16-20) This is very different from simply making “converts”. Jesus defines it in that same command as “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you”. It’s a cycle of obligation to not just put into practice God’s Word in one’s own life, but pass that example of obedience to subsequent generations.

Up until this point in history, leadership was decided mostly by one’s age and birth sequence. The firstborn and/or eldest was most often the leader. Even before God would formally give His written Word in the form of the first 5 books of the Bible through Moses, God established a system of leadership rooted in discipleship. The measure of its success was the degree to which all its participants at every level put into practice God’s Word.

¹³It came about the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening.

¹⁴Now when Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, “What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?”

¹⁵Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God. ¹⁶“When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His laws.”

¹⁷Moses’ father-in-law said to him, “The thing that you are doing is not good.

¹⁸You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. ¹⁹Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people’s representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, ²⁰then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do.

[Read v.13-16]

Q: How would you summarize the core problem?

A: Only one man (Moses) knew “the statutes of God and His laws”. (v.16) There was no other choice other than to go to Moses because he was the only one that knew God’s Word.

Q: Why do you think that the problem affected the people as much as it did Moses?

A: Besides having to wait in a single line for one and only one judge, everyone was unproductive as they stood about awaiting their turn. They would not only be absent from whatever work needed to be done, but their emotions would “stew” as they were consumed by the anticipation during such long waits. It was therefore unproductive on a number of levels.

Q: What do you suppose they did BEFORE Moses? What changed?

A: It’s most likely that such disputes were taken to tribal elders. What changed is the presence of one equipped with the Word of God.

[Read v.17-20]

Q: How does this old proverb apply to the advice given Moses: “Give a man a fish and feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and feed him for a lifetime”?

A: Instead of merely telling the people the outcome—literally, what to do for just the present situation—Moses is to teach them God’s Word and how to apply it for any similar situations that arise so that they will be able to settle or avoid the disagreement altogether.

Q: In v.20, what indicates that Moses is to teach how to apply God’s Word rather than just provide an answer to questions about God’s Word?

A: He is to “make known to them the way in which they are to walk”—to apply His Word as an agent of change in their attitude, behavior, and faith—and “the work they are to do”—the putting into practice God’s Word in their actions and service.

Q: From a leadership point of view, what is the best advice Moses was given as he carries this out?

A: Probably “and God be with you”. It’s important that the leader never lose his connection with God so that he never purposely or inadvertently replaces God as the ultimate authority figure. [Bonus Question: How do we know this is going to be an issue for Moses personally? Answer: When he replaces God’s name with “we” in providing the people water. See Numbers 20:9-13]

²¹“Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. ²²Let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. ²³If you do this thing and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace.”

[Read v.21-23]

Q: What are the qualifications of the judges/leaders that Moses appoints?

1. “able men”
2. “...who fear God”
3. “men of truth”
4. “who hate dishonest gain”

Q: How would you characterize these men? How is this a significant departure from the way leaders were designated prior to this time?

A: They're not just people possessing superior skills and knowledge, but accompanied by superior spiritual and moral character. Prior to this, things such as age or who was the firstborn dictated who was in authority regardless of their personal qualities or character.

Q: Why do you suppose that “love” is not one of the listed requirements?

A: There is no true, biblical love without first being established in and living the truth.

Q: Do you see any similarities between this and the way Jesus operated His earthly ministry?

A: He trained and sent out an inner circle of 12 and a subsequent echelon of 70. When they could not address a need it was brought to Christ's attention. But the overriding characteristic of their work was to preach the Gospel and teach people how to apply God's Word to their life.

Q: Do you see any similarities between this and Paul's teaching about the structure of the body of Christ?

And God has appointed in the church, **first** apostles, **second** prophets, **third** teachers, **then** miracles, **then** gifts of healings, **helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.**

1 Corinthians 12:28

[Read v.24-26]

²⁴So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. ²⁵Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. ²⁶They judged the people at all times; the difficult dispute they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute they themselves would judge.

Q: How do you suppose they determined whether something was “minor” or “difficult”?

A: Most likely the “difficult” issues are things that never came up before for which they have no reference to the Word of God on which to act, whereas the “minor” issues repeatedly fall into categories for which God's Word was already made known.

Overall Application

- *If ever involved in a discussion of who should be appointed to a position of authority or leadership, what criteria would you use? How would you go about it that would adhere closest to the Bible's guidelines?*
- *How do you feel about the stance that only a priest or pastor or qualified scholar is capable of interpreting Scripture? How does that apply in the context of this study?*
- *What is the dual role of Believers as both submitting to a greater authority and themselves being an authority over others? How are you to act in each role? What are the conditions when you need to go "higher" or go no further?*
- *What is the common denominator at work at every level from the people, to the leaders, even all the way up to Moses? [They must all embrace God's Word and put it into practice.] What is the application of this lesson for you personally?*