

Spiritual Growth Lessons

LESSON 7 of 32

THE INNER CIRCLE

"Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, it is the Lord" (John 21:7).

John refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" five times in the book of John. Does Jesus Christ love everyone equally? That is a difficult question, but it is evident that some people do enjoy a special relationship with Jesus Christ. They experience things that the average believer never dream of. They have deep secrets whispered into their ears that are never revealed to the normal Christian. They are partakers of a friendship and fellowship that most people do not even realize is possible for them. These people are part of "the inner circle."

There were several such people in the Old Testament. Both Abraham and Moses were referred to by God as His "friends" (Exodus 33:11; James 2:23). David was called by God, ". . . a man after mine own heart . . ." (Acts 13:22). But it is in the New Testament that we find an even more beautiful illustration. It is the intimate relationship that Peter, James, and John enjoyed with Jesus Christ.

Jesus chose twelve men to be apostles. For many months He had a close relationship with all of them--eating, drinking, and sleeping with them. But most of all, He poured Himself into them--both by word and example.

Although He loved them all unto the end (John 13:1), He singled out three of them to become "charter members of the ICC--the Inner Circle Club" (the author's nickname). The close relationship that Peter, James, and John had with Jesus is so beautiful to note, especially that of John and Peter. (We don't read much about James, who was obviously the more reserved of the three). Peter, the loud-mouthed one, always seemed to be in constant rivalry with the more affectionate John for that place nearest to the heart of Jesus.

The first time Jesus singled out these men to be His special companions was when He visited the house of Jairus, to raise his daughter from the dead. Upon arrival at the house, Jesus found the mourners all doing their professional best to weep for the dead girl. But Jesus told them to stop making such a fuss over her, since she was not dead, but just "asleep." Then the mourners became mockers.

Jesus then put them out of the house, and taking only the parents and His "inner circle" friends, He entered the room where the body lay. Taking the girl by the hand, He commanded her to arise. "And straightway the damsel arose, and walked; for she was of the age of twelve years. And they were astonished with a great astonishment" (Mark 5:37-42).

Why did Jesus Christ choose to take only Peter, James, and John with Him to the house of death? Why not the rest of the twelve? Later, all of them would witness the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead, but this initial display of the resurrection power of God was reserved especially for the three closest to Him. He delights to share His power with those who love Him most!

Six days after Peter's great declaration of faith, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus led His "inner circle" friends up into a high mountain "apart by themselves." It was here that Jesus was transfigured before them, with His white raiment shining whiter than snow "as no fuller on earth can white them." It was also here that Moses and Elijah appeared unto Jesus, and talked with Him. Oh, what a display of God's power and glory! How much closer to heaven can one get, and still

be on this earth? Where can one go to find such fellowship? That great lawgiver, Moses, and Elijah, one of the most fearless of all prophets--except where Jezebel was concerned. And, of course, Jesus!

"Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias (Elijah)." It was Peter! The Bible tells us that he was actually terrified by the sight, but he had to open his mouth and say something.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke out of the cloud, *"This is my beloved Son: hear him."* When they looked around, Moses and Elijah had disappeared. When they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them that they should tell no man what they had seen until He had risen from the dead. No man, not even the other nine disciples! (Mark 9:2-9) How hard it must have been for talkative Peter to keep so great a secret to himself. He could not even share it with his brother, Andrew, who had brought him to Jesus!



Again we are faced with the question, "Why did Jesus choose these three particular men to share the transfiguration experience?" Adam Clarke, well-known for his Bible Commentary, offers this suggestion: ". . . He chose those (Peter, James, and John) that they might be witnesses of his transfiguration, two or three witnesses being required by the scriptures to substantiate any fact. The same three were made witnesses of his agony in the garden."

At first glance, this might seem to be sound reasoning, but aren't twelve witnesses better than three? And why were they commanded not to share the experience with the other disciples until after His resurrection?

JESUS CHRIST WAS FULLY GOD--YET FULLY MAN!

Jesus Christ came into this world fully God--yet fully man! His physical needs were the same as ours. He got tired, hungry, and thirsty. As our example, He was both Spirit and water baptized (Matthew 3:15-17). The man Christ Jesus prayed to the Spirit (Father) who dwelt within Him. The man Christ Jesus also had social needs--people who loved Him, to whom He could share His heart secrets with. People with whom He could be real and open--even people who would stand by Him in His hour of crisis! This is the kind of relationship Jesus was building with these men.

But why these men? True, they were men that would each play an important part in the development of the church of Jesus Christ, but why were they chosen for that role? Could it be because of their special love and devotion to Jesus Christ? That is what I read in the oft repeated words of John concerning himself, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." If it is true that Jesus did love John more than the other disciples, it also seems evident by the Scriptures that John probably loved Jesus more than the other eleven.

Just as He gave these men the privilege to share in the raising of Jairus' daughter, He also rewarded them for their love and devotion by singling them out for the "transfiguration experience." He delights to share His glory with those who love Him most.

This close relationship was especially noticeable in the lives of Peter and John, who were more demonstrative of their love and devotion to Jesus. See them as they sat at the table with Jesus, partaking of the last passover with Him. John sat as close to Jesus as he possibly could. Just to make sure that he didn't miss a word Jesus spoke, he leaned upon His breast here he could hear even His heartbeat. Somewhere close by was Peter, probably envious that he himself was not occupying that "chief

position."

Then Jesus made a dramatic announcement. "*Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.*" Shock! One by one the disciples questioned Him, "*Lord, is it I?*" But Jesus did not commit Himself to the whole group. Then Peter, knowing that if anyone could extract that bit of information from Jesus, John could, beckoned unto John to find out who the traitor would be. John quietly asked, "*Lord, who is it?*" There was no hesitation on the part of Jesus to share His secret with the one who occupied the closest place to Him. "*He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it,*" Jesus whispered.

Jesus then dipped the sop and gave it to Judas Iscariot. After he had done this, He told him, "*That thou doest, do quickly.*" Nobody at the table (except John, of course) knew why Jesus spoke those words to Judas, because they had not been a part of the secret. Read and compare Matthew 26:21-22, and John 13:21-29. What we learn from this is that He delights to reveal His choicest secrets to those who love Him most!

The next scene took place in the Garden of Gethsemane, a place where Jesus often came with His disciples. But things were different this time. To start off with, Judas was not present, because he was busy making arrangements for the betrayal. Meanwhile, Jesus came to the place of prayer with a heavy heart, and tremendous inner turmoil. He who knew no sin, had to become sin for us. He had to become willing to take upon Himself the sins of the whole human race.

It was the most critical hour of Jesus' entire life, but He did not reveal His inner conflict yet. Not far into the garden he dismissed eight of His disciples. "*Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder,*" He instructed them. They were given no special duties or instructions. They were told nothing about what was going on inside of Him. They were told only to sit!

"And taking with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, He began to show grief and distress of mind and was deeply depressed" (Matthew 26:37, Amplified Bible).

He did not feel free to show what he felt to all His disciples. Some of them perhaps would misunderstand Him and get panicky that their leader was so unstable. (Leaders aren't supposed to be human, according to some people's opinion.) But with His "inner circle" friends He could share not only His glory, but also His grief. He could "take off His mask" and reveal exactly how He felt: "*Then He said to them, My soul is very sad and deeply grieved, so that I am almost dying of sorrow. Stay here and keep awake and watch with me*" (verse 38, Amplified Bible).

It is so very true that Jesus delights to reveal His true self to those who love Him most!

The next important event took place on a hill called Golgotha, where love was demonstrated like it never had been before. The sinless Lamb of God hung suspended between heaven and earth on a wooden cross, but it was not the nails that kept Him there, it was His love. Not far away, Roman soldiers gambled for His seamless tunic, being too valuable to destroy. His other clothing was torn into four pieces so that each man might have a souvenir from their conquest.

Close by the cross stood three Mary's: Jesus' mother, the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus had cast out seven devils. Oh how this woman loved Jesus! Many Bible scholars believe that she was the woman who washed Jesus' feet with here tears, and wiped them with her long hair, after which she anointed them with costly ointments. Jesus used this same woman as an example of one who loves Him most. (Luke 7:37-47)

Who else was standing with the women? John, of course! While it seems the other nine disciples had forsaken Jesus Christ, John and Peter did follow Him. Though Peter

followed Him "afar off," John had actually gone inside the palace of the high priest with Jesus, being known by the high priest. In fact, John spoke to the woman who kept the door, so that she would allow entrance to Peter. The sad thing is that it was here that Peter denied his Lord three times, and cursed. (John 18:15-27; Matthew 26:58-75)

Whether Peter was present at the crucifixion, we know not. He probably was. However, it was to John that Jesus looked when He needed someone that He could trust with the care of His mother: *"When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home"* (John 19:26-27).

Jesus knew that he who loved Him most would, at least for the sake of that love, take care of that which had been committed unto his charge. Jesus Christ commits the most unto those who love Him most. Three days later, early in the morning before daybreak, Mary Magdalene made her way to the sepulchre where Jesus was buried. Mary, the mother of James and Salome, also went with her to anoint the body of Jesus with sweet spices. They had one chief concern. "Who will roll away the stone?" Imagine their surprise when they found that the stone had already been rolled away. Then a heavenly visitor spoke to them:

". . . Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there ye shall see him, as he said unto you" (Mark 16:6, 7).

". . . and Peter." Almost surprisingly, the only name Jesus singled out among the disciples had been that of Peter, not John. After's Peter's thrice denial of his Lord, he needed special reassurance that Jesus still loved Him--that he had not lost his membership in the "inner circle club."

A mother of twelve children was once asked, "Which of your children do you love the most." Without hesitation she replied, "The one who needs my love the most." Such was the case with Peter at that time.

Mary Magdalene was quick to obey the angel's bidding. She ran to Peter and John with the good news of Jesus' resurrection. No doubt Peter's heart warmed as she spoke those words "and Peter," and he probably glanced out of the corner of his eye to see if John caught it. He had been forgiven!

With that glad assurance, Peter began to make a wild dash for the sepulchre. Jesus was alive! He must go and see the tomb for himself. Suddenly he realized that he was not alone. Running along side of him was John, and like two Olympic contestants they dashed down the road from which Mary Magdalene had just come.

John just did beat Peter "for the gold medal," and stooping down, he looked in and saw the linen clothes--yet he went not in. However, without hesitation the bolder Peter entered, followed by John. What they saw caused them to become firm believers.

A lie had been circulated that Jesus' disciples had stolen away his body. If that had been true, they would not have bothered to take the time to strip the clothes from it, and to wrap them up and lay them neatly in separate places--and that is what they found!

How their hearts were filled with joy as they began to understand some of the things they had been unable to grasp. Once more Jesus Christ had proved to them beyond the shadow of a doubt that He was indeed the true God manifest in flesh. God delights to reveal His deity to those that love Him most!

Some days later, Peter was on an outing with six other disciples. It was old, familiar territory to Peter, perhaps a little too familiar. The Sea of Galilee was as beautiful as it had ever been that day. Scenes from the past raced through Peter's mind. Fishing! Many people fish because they like to. They don't really care if they catch anything or not. But it had been a means of livelihood to Peter. Sometimes he caught little or nothing. But there were those times that the night's catch had provided them with some of the "extras" in life. That is why he had continued his trade until the day that Jesus passed by with the command, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Something about that "man" had made him willing to become His disciple, forsaking all to follow Him.

The sun was setting in the western sky, while a slight breeze stirred the air. It seemed to be an ideal night. Suddenly Peter heard himself saying, "I go a-fishing." Peter did not know what the response of the other six would be, but James and John, Thomas and Nathanael, and the other two disciples quickly agreed to follow him. Soon they were out in the waters of Tiberias, which was the more familiar name to the Gentiles.

After a night of fruitless effort, they headed towards the shore, tired and dejected. It had been, after all, a wasted night! Still some distance away, they could see someone on the shore with a fire burning-- evidently cooking his breakfast. Was it another fisherman? Then they heard the man call out to them, "*Children, have ye any meat?*" It was Jesus, but they did not immediately recognize Him. Possibly they were close enough to hear his voice, but not see his physical features clearly.

How hard it was to admit to this "stranger" that they had caught nothing. Jesus, however, called to them, "*Cast your net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find.*" Well, the "stranger" evidently had caught some fish himself, so maybe he did know what he was talking about, they thought. When they obeyed, their net was filled with such an abundance of fish that it was only with great difficulty that they were able to bring them in.

The one who sat closest to Jesus at the table could no longer be deceived. "*It is the Lord,*" John cried out. When Peter heard this, he leaped out of the boat and made his way to Jesus. John might have been the first to recognize Him, but it was Peter who was the first to come running up to his Lord.

It was probably with some feeling of shame that these seven men gathered around Jesus. He had been taken away from them, suffered cruelly for them, and in a few days He would be taken from them again. The "inner circle" men must have been feeling especially small that day. All three of them had been fishermen by trade. They had been called to catch men now, not fish. Somehow their return to the water, even for just one night of fun, seemed a little wrong when their Lord would soon be taken from them. Perhaps they looked warily at Jesus as they sat down to the meal of fish and bread that He had prepared. But there was no sermon--yet.

Seven men that Jesus Christ had often referred to as His "friends" sat down to eat with Him. How often He had shown His love and compassion towards them. He could have been angry that so soon after His death and resurrection they had their fishing trip. Yet He made sure that it was a successful one, and He had even prepared a good breakfast for them, because He shares His love with those who love Him most! It was only after the meal was finished that Jesus looked deep into Peter's eyes. He had been the one to initiate the whole fishing trip. The others had just followed their natural born leader. "*Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?*" Jesus said, nodding towards the fish. Peter's eyes first went in the direction of the nod, and then dropped. "*Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.*" "*Feed my lambs,*" Jesus replied. There was a pause, but Jesus was not finished. Once again came the searching question, "*Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?*" Again Peter answered, this time raising his voice just a little, "*Yea, Lord, thou knowest that I love thee.*" Jesus answered, "Feed my sheep." Another quiet pause.

To the person who had denied Him three times, Jesus asked one more time, "*Simon,*

son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" Peter would never forget that morning. That question was indelibly imprinted in his brain for all time! "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." (John 21:2-17)

Yes, He does know all things. He knows how little or how much we love Him. He knows "how far down the table we choose to sit," or whether we are even "in the same room" with Jesus. He knows if we are just "sitters," or have made ourselves available to be His close friends--willing to share His glory, His power--and even His sufferings.

He knows if there are "fish" in our lives that we love more than we love Him, so He is asking us today, *"Lovest thou me more than these?" ds*

<http://www.sayadi-al-nas.com>