

1. Discipleship: What is it?

Becoming a Disciple Series

Warm-up Question: In just a few sentences, tell about a time when you had to learn something new (a hobby, sport, trade, etc.) How long did it take you to learn or are you still learning to do it?

GOD HAS CALLED US TO FRUITFULNESS

If you are a Christian, it is because the Father has drawn you to Himself. We like to think that we had a big hand in it, and of course, you have responded to His call. If you are a Christian, your seeking heart drew you to the Lord Jesus. The other side of that truth is that God has worked in your life and your situation in such a way to bring you to the place where you would call out to Him. He is the One who has started the work in you, and He is the one who will finish it. Jesus said, *“This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them” (John 6:65)*. He loved us so much that He called us into a relationship to Himself. H.A. Ironside described it well when he postulated that on the gates of heaven we will read going in, “Whosoever will, let him come” (Revelation 22:17), but when we enter and turn around, on the inside of the gates is inscribed “Chosen...in Him before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4).

Many people come to Christ and have not been told the whole package. We live in a day of easy “believe-ism,” where the message is just to come to Christ and simply believe. Yes, I do believe it is that simple. It takes our belief, repentance and our confession to invite the Lord Jesus to take up residence in our hearts and our lives. However, even though the message is simple, the Christian life is not easy. There is more to it than that. Many people are attracted to Christ because of what they can get out of it and have little thought of what He wants of us. How should we now live, and what should our lives look like if we are to live for Him? Don’t get me wrong, Jesus *did* come to give us life, and life more abundantly, but there is something that He wants of us—total commitment to His cause. Eternal lives are at stake, and He needs all of us to give up our lives and no longer live for self.

Living this kind of life may sound impossible, but the exciting part is that He is the one who also enables us to make this possible. He can live through us, with us and in us to create a life that is richer, more meaningful, and more far-reaching than we could ever accomplish by living for self. Evans Hopkins once said, “True Christianity is an all-out commitment to the living Christ...The Savior is not looking for fans but followers—followers who will go with Him to death if necessary.” We are to live in the same way Jesus lived and to bear fruit for God for the rest of our lives on earth. Jesus used the analogy of a Vine and the branches. He said that the Vine was a picture of Himself and that the branches were a picture of the life and vitality of the Vine flowing to His people, the church. The branches would produce fruit—the fruit of changed lives:

This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (John 15:8).

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last (John 15:16).

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19a).□

When you think of the command of Christ to make disciples, what does a disciple look like to you? Do you think a modern-day disciple differs from the life of a disciple of Christ in New Testament times? Discuss similarities or differences.□

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

dis·ci·ple (dis-ī-pəl) *n.* **1.a.** One who embraces and assists in spreading the teachings of another.¹

The Greek word for ‘disciple’ (*‘mathetes’*) was used before the time of Christ to denote a ‘follower’ or ‘student’ of a particular teacher or philosopher. The disciple had the responsibility of not only **putting the Master’s teaching into practice** but **passing his teaching along to others**. Disciples are called to champion the cause, reproduce the skills, and propagate their teacher’s teaching. They receive their teacher’s flame, carry the torch and pass along the same fire to others that they may run with it.

From ancient times the word ‘disciple’ has been used to describe students who are passionately loyal to their teacher. The master models to the disciple how he is to live and how he is to pass on the master’s teaching. A.W. Tozer once said,

“The new Christian is like a man who has learned to drive in a country where the traffic moves on the left side of the highway and suddenly finds himself in another country and forced to drive on the right. He must unlearn his old habit and learn a new one and, more serious than all, he must learn in heavy traffic.”²

As a result of their involvement with their Master, disciples learn a new way of thinking and behaving. They exhibit a new way of life. They embody their master’s disciplines. What does the word discipline mean?

dis·ci·pline (‘dis-ə-plən) *n.* **1.** Training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior; especially training that produces moral or mental improvement.

With this in mind we can summarize the concepts found in the Greek word ‘mathetes’ translated into the English word *disciple*:

¹ Definitions are from the American Heritage Dictionary

² Compiled by John Blanchard. *Gathered Gold, A Treasury of Quotations for Christians*, Evangelical Press, 1984

A disciple is a:



F- FOLLOWER

L- LEARNER

A- APPRENTICE

M- MULTIPLYING MENTOREE³

E- EXAMPLE

YOU CANNOT BE A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST ON YOUR OWN TERMS

Jesus calls His followers to a relationship of uncompromising trust and obedience. Some found His conditions too demanding and went away sorrowing (Luke 18:23).

Some were attracted to His teaching, miracles and the winsomeness of His person, but wanted to follow Him on their terms. □

⁵⁷“As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” ⁵⁹He said to another man, “Follow me.” But the man replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” ⁶²Jesus replied, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:57-62; See also Matthew 8:18-22).

Jesus' words here are solemn. Why would the Lord be so hard on these men?

Our self-life/flesh tends to find all kinds of reasons as to why we should not fully follow the Lord wholeheartedly. It is likely that the man who wanted to bury his father before following Christ, had not had his father actually die yet! The man was asking permission of Jesus to delay following him, perhaps to get his father's inheritance and then follow. Jesus replied to let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead. These men mentioned in the above Scripture were showing that they had not yet grasped the urgency and importance of the task of saving lives to which Jesus was calling them. Many of us want to wait until we are economically better off before we follow wholeheartedly. □

³ One who is subject to a mentor, a trusted teacher or counselor. The concept of a Mentor comes from Homer's "Odyssey" in Greek Mythology. Mentor is Odysseus's trusted friend who is given the responsibility of Odysseus's household in his absence and is responsible for the tutelage of Odysseus's son, Telemachus.

The Lord Jesus is drafting all of his children into His army. We are conscripts, not volunteers. We are summoned to feast on the knowledge of Christ, our Commander in Chief. But we all too quickly find excuses and dodge the draft. □

¹⁶“Jesus replied: ‘A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. ¹⁷At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ ¹⁸But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ ¹⁹Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ ²⁰Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’ ²¹The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’ ²²‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’ ²³Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. ²⁴I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet’” (Luke 14:16-24).

I became a Christian in America in the summer of 1977. It was a compelling experience of the love of God for me that turned my life around. When I returned to England, I managed to stay away from the drug culture that had consumed my life for several years. God kept me from giving in to temptation, but I became aware within several months that the glow of my love for Christ was not the same as the early days of my walk. Life became a drudgery of boredom that left me empty. I sensed the Lord telling me to leave and go to Israel to see some friends that I had met at the place I had become a Christian. It was a risky thing to do, to leave all that I had, my comfortable life, my lucrative fishing job. I battled inwardly, wondering what would I do there. I wanted something more from my life than just being a pew warmer—I didn't know what I could do or how God would use me, but it didn't seem like I was growing in the little church I was in, there in my comfortable hometown. Within five months of giving my life to Christ, I sold everything I had and bought an air-ticket that lasted for six months, and flew off to Israel. I resolved that I would follow the Lord's leading wherever He led me. Within a couple of weeks of living in Israel, I received a prophecy that if I gave the Lord four months of my time in Israel, He would raise me up to be a man of God. I am not there yet, but I am still on the way. All because I gave up making excuses as to why I would not follow wholeheartedly. □

Can you think of any excuses you have made in the past that have held you back from wholeheartedly following the Lord Jesus? What, if anything, is holding you back now?

Marriage, family, and business are essential to God. But they are never legitimate excuses to dodge the draft of discipleship. It is through discipleship that God will bring blessing to your spouse, your children and your business. □

Jesus elevates the meaning of ‘discipleship’ to the process of being restored to the image of God by following Him through death to self and uncompromised obedience to live for Him in the power of his new life in Christ.

²⁵“Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: ²⁶‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple’” (Luke 14:25-27).

The Call to Discipleship is a call to have all other loves purified by our higher and prior commitment to Christ.

Jesus is saying that we need to admit that our natural dedication and natural affection is infinitely inferior to the devotion and affection that God can express through us when our lives are fully yielded to Him. We cannot love our father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters or ourselves properly unless we forsake our own love and receive the love that God has for our parents, spouse, children, siblings and ourselves. When Jesus calls a man or a woman to follow him, it is a call to “come, die and live.”

We cannot follow him if we are alive to our self-dominated- “me first”- excuse making; the internal programming which we inherited from Adam. We must admit that we, in ourselves, do not have what it takes to be a disciple of Christ!

The saying is true: “The Christian life is not difficult. It is impossible. The only one who can live it is Christ.” The rich young ruler learned that “what is impossible with man is possible with God” (Luke 18:27). The disciples learned that rich people have a difficult time entering the kingdom of God. Jesus said that without coming into the substitutionary work of Christ, it couldn’t be done.

The sooner we come to grips with this the better: It takes Christ’s LIFE to be Christ-like. When Christianity fails to be the outliving of the Indwelling Christ, it is fraudulent.

TO COUNT THE COST

²⁸“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? ²⁹For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, ³⁰saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³²If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ³³In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:28-33).

If we were only able to visualize all that Christ gives us in return for the life we exchange with Him, it would seem a minimal sacrifice on our part. He promises to provide us with life in abundance. C.S. Lewis once said, “Christ does not ask everyone to give up everything for Him, but He does expect them to be **willing** to give up everything.” Jesus’ call is uncompromising. Discipleship at all costs and discipleship costs all. The good news is that Jesus gives us the “all” that discipleship requires. He gave ALL that He was, in dying for us on the Cross. He rose from

the dead, ascended to the Father and now gives ALL that He is in the power of resurrection to us through His indwelling Holy Spirit.

How can we fulfill our commitment to Christ? Like the builder of the tower, we must admit our human inadequacy, declare bankruptcy and appeal to the mercy of a higher court. The verdict is that there are resources available from outside our self to finish the work started. In the words of Major Ian Thomas, “All that He is is all that I have. I can never have more and need never have less.”

“The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

“Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

There is nothing casual about discipleship. Jesus calls for a radical commitment in which nothing or no one takes God’s place of primacy in our affections and loyalty. A disciple is one who is wholly devoted to the pursuit of an ongoing relationship of obedience and commitment to Christ. The goal is that we know Him and become like Him, and as we know Him, we will make Him known. When we fully surrender to God His grace can work in ways we could not imagine!□

Our surrender to God is an act of our will. You must first trust God fully to surrender to Him entirely. Ask God about which areas of your life you need to trust Him more. Ask for His help in actively putting your trust in His ability to sustain you and protect you. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). He has the best in mind for your life and knows your needs even better than you do. Take time in prayer to identify those things that would hold you back from becoming a fully committed follower of Christ. Be aware of your greatest fears as well as your strongest temptations. Then, present these things to Him and ask Him to take ruler ship over them.

Ask the Holy Spirit to remind you whenever these things start to cloud your decision-making or challenge your first commitment to Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit will come when invited, as He is the one who “comes alongside” us to show the way of God more perfectly. You will also need to fill your mind with the Word of God, which will influence your decision-making and even your desires. God’s Word is creative. Television, Internet, and other media are so prevalent in our lives that exposure to it must be controlled. We need to recognize and choose what will be the loudest voices, so to speak, in our lives. Whatever we decide to give our time to; whatever influences our thoughts, will doubtless affect our minds and therefore, our will.

To fully surrender, we also need to acknowledge that it will change our lives. To deliberately consider what this means is to “count the cost.” Whereas God’s grace is always sufficient, to count the cost means we must have a ‘reality check.’

- To be a follower of Christ is not comfortable.
- To be a follower of Christ means that you will experience hardship, rejection, persecution and the first-hand experience of spiritual warfare.□

- ❑ To be a follower of Christ means there will be times you feel broken hearted, and sometimes 'broke.'⁴
- ❑ To be a follower of Christ means you will face all kinds of pressure, opinions, and you will wade through controversy.
- ❑ There will be days as a follower of Christ when you feel like quitting but must persevere by faith.
- ❑ To be a follower of Christ means that you will share in His sufferings if you would also share in His glory. You must be willing to be the outcast.
- ❑ To be a follower of Christ means the more that you love, the less you may be loved in return (See 2 Corinthians 12:15).⁴

Following Christ will cost you. You must risk all the consequences of obedience to the One who is called faithful and true, but being faithful in following Christ is worth it all. The benefits are numerous:

- ❑ An ever-increasing glorious future. “Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12:3).
- ❑ There will be a close communion with Christ and fellowship in His joy and suffering. Jesus said, “I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15).
- ❑ You will make an impact on those around you as you become an example for others to follow. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people” (Matt. 4:19). C. T. Studd, the great missionary to China, understood the challenge well. He wrote, “Some people want to live within the sound of chapel bells, but I want to run a mission a yard from the gate of hell.”
- ❑ Fruit and rewards in this lifetime. “Truly I tell you,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life” (Luke 18:29-30).
- ❑ Eternal Rewards, yet to be revealed! “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived; the things God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

The choice is before all of us whether to follow or not to follow Christ. Our response will change not only our lives but also the lives of those around us. There is a well-known Christmas movie that depicts this so well. It is called, *It's a Wonderful Life*. This film has come to be regarded as a classic and a staple of Christmas television around the world. The American Film Institute has recognized the movie as one of the 100 best American films ever made and has placed it as number one on its list of the most inspirational American films of all time. Philip Van Doren Stern wrote the original story, *The Greatest Gift*, in November 1939. After being unsuccessful in getting the story published, he decided to make it into a Christmas card, and mailed 200 copies to family and friends in December 1943. It was not until the story came to the attention of RKO

⁴ So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less? (2 Corinthians 12:15).

producer David Hempstead, that it became the movie we know today. He showed it to Cary Grant's Hollywood agent and the rest is history. For those of you who do not know the story, it is about George Bailey, a man whose imminent suicide on Christmas Eve brings about the intervention of his guardian angel, Clarence Odbody. Clarence shows George all the lives he has touched and the contributions he has made to his community, and how different it would be had he never been born. The two stories are told simultaneously, and the viewer can compare these two lives; a life lived with others in mind, and a life lived entirely for self. Although it may be on the extreme end of the scale, we all make a similar choice in reality. Imagine for a moment, two movies are being made, both about your life. One would depict the story of your life as a disciple of Jesus Christ and another about a life lived for self, a life of your own choosing. Imagine how they may differ, the lives that would be affected, and the rewards earned or lost. All of our lives resound for eternity one way or another. Which movie will you star in? You will invest your life in making one or the other.

Prayer: Father, I surrender myself into your loving arms. Grant me the grace to live for you in this life, that I may make choices with my life that is God-honoring. Amen. □

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