

## What is a Disciple?

Prayer:

Intro:

### What does it mean to be a Christian?

- You might get a few different responses to that question...
  - o Someone might say, “someone who goes to Church, prays, maybe reads the Bible.”
    - Those things are things a Christian does, but that’s not what it means to be a Christian.
  - o Someone else might say, “someone who professes faith in Jesus.”
    - And that’s true. That’s what a Christian believes, but that’s only a part of it. It’s the first part, and a hugely important part, but it’s not the whole of it.
    - It’s because a lot of people think that is the whole of what it means to be a Christian that the capital C church has utterly failed to be what Jesus intended for it to be, both to our own detriment and the detriment of those who would be a Christian but choose not to be because of how they see people who proclaim to be Christians living their lives.
  - o And still you could ask another person, maybe somebody who grew up in a Bible teaching church, and they might go into what the word “Christian” means. It means “little Christ,” and so to be a Christian means to be an imitator of Jesus. A “little” representative of Him.
    - And while that answer is true, it still begs the question, “if you’re an imitator of Jesus, or, in other words, somebody who behaves in a similar way to Jesus, how did Jesus behave. What did He do and say?”
    - After all, if you are an imitator of Him, then one must assume that you do and say the same types of things Jesus did and said. Right?
    - So the word Christian itself is limited in its ability to describe what it means to know Jesus. It still leaves you asking questions about Jesus; who He was, what He did, and what He said.
- And that brings us to an all-important observation. The word “Christian” is used a total of 3 times in the New Testament, while the word disciple is used 269 times in the New Testament, and the times Christian is used it is used to refer precisely to the disciples (Dallas Willard, “Discipleship: For Super Christians Only?” *Christianity Today*, 10 October 1980, 24). Both words are used to describe those who know and follow Jesus, but clearly one of these words is used much more prevalently than the other, and one of these words (Christian) is only used as a reference to the other (disciple).

- So one must assume that the word disciple, from a biblical point of view, has a fuller and more informative definition for us for what it means to know Jesus.
- And so the primary question we ought to be asking is not what does it mean to be a Christian, but rather, what does it mean to be a disciple?
- If we can answer that question, then we will finally actually know what it means to know Jesus, and what it is that He expects of us.

### Message:

#### **What does it mean to be a disciple?**

- The word that is translated disciple in your Bibles comes from the Greek word *matheta*, which most basically means “learner,” but to gain a fuller understanding of what the text means when it uses this word, you need to look at what Jesus actually told them to do and say.
- In Matthew 4, right after Jesus was tempted in the wilderness and yet did not sin, He begins His ministry, and shortly after doing so, He recruits His first disciples.
- And this is what the text says, picking it up in Matthew 4 verse 18,

Matthew 4:18-22, “While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.”

- Though the word disciple isn’t used in this passage, we know that these are the disciples because that word is used in reference to them in other places in Matthew, such as Matthew 10:1-4.
- So what do we see here in Mathew 4? According to Matthew 4, what does it mean to be a disciple?
- In this case, what we see is a wholesale commitment to following Jesus and recruiting others to do the same.
- This is the start of the discipleship journey for these young men.
- They are called out by the Son of God to be wholly committed to Him and what He is doing (even to the point of losing their jobs) and to call others to do the same.
- So from day one of being a disciple, they knew it meant two things:
  - 1. An all-out commitment to Jesus. To following Him. To learning from Him. To learning to do the same types of things He did. To say the same types of things He said.
  - And 2. That just as Jesus had recruited them, they were to recruit others. Jesus was going to teach them how, Jesus Himself was going to make

them into the sorts of people that could do this, fish for men, but they were going to do it.

- This is what it means to be a disciple at the entry level (not like, some advanced level of disciple). Jesus was really clear from day one on what He expects from His disciples.
  - o All out, immediate commitment to learning from His life.
  - o And the willingness to call others to do the same.
- And while this might strike us in our culture as strange or odd, it wouldn't have struck them in the same way.
  - o There was a strong rabbinical tradition in Israel at the time in which a teacher or Rabbi, would recruit young men who showed promise to "follow" them. In other words, to become their devoted students, who literally followed them around. And these rabbis would pass on everything they knew to their disciples, and not just that. But as their disciples followed them around, they would observe their Rabbi, learning to imitate him. They would watch how he interacted with others and interact the same way. They would listen to the words their rabbi spoke and how he spoke them, and then say the same type of things in the same type of way. A disciple of a rabbi was someone who had the dust of the rabbi on their robes, meaning that they followed him so closely, imitating even the way that he walked, that as he kicked up dust from his feet as he walked it would get on the robes of his followers.
  - o And so in that culture, to be a disciple was an intensive, life on life endeavor, in which a learned older man would teach younger men how to become like him.
  - o To put it another way, "a student learns what his teacher knows, but a disciple becomes what his master is" (Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes*, Thomas Nelson Inc.: Nashville, TN, 225).
- So Jesus, by recruiting disciples, was not doing something totally unheard of. What was unheard of was a non-educated carpenter turned homeless man assuming the role of a Rabbi, claiming to be the Son of God, and then recruiting the rabbinical school drop-outs, who had returned to their family profession of fishing because they weren't smart enough to stay in school, to be his disciples.
- That, indeed, was unorthodox. It's almost as if Jesus wanted it to be really clear where the power, authority insight, and truth of His ministry came from, God. Because it couldn't have possibly come from anywhere else.
- So Jesus recruits Peter and Andrew, James and John to be His disciples, to follow Him around and learn from Him everything He knew. To do and say the same things He was doing and saying.
- And so what was Jesus doing and saying? We know what He was doing and saying from the verse directly preceding this passage and the verse directly

following it. Matthew 4:17, which tells us what He was doing just before calling His disciples, says, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And then in Matthew 4:23, right after calling His disciples, we see that "...he went through all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and affliction among the people."

- Jesus was on a mission to get people ready for the establishment of God's kingdom on this earth. In verse 17 Jesus said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," meaning, "the kingdom is close, it's about to be here. It is coming, so turn (repent) from your former way of living and hitch your wagon to me (Jesus)."
- He's the proclaiming the inauguration of the kingdom of God
- And he's not just proclaiming it, but as we see in verse 23, he was demonstrating it through signs and wonders (much like Moses did when he came to the Israelites enslaved in Egypt). He was showing that the power of the kingdom of God, the power of reverse all the effects of sin, was here and was active.
- If that's what Jesus was doing when he says to Peter and Andrew, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men," what He is saying is "become a part of my ministry. Learn from me. Learn to do the things I am doing and to say the things I am saying."
  - o And so, to say that stating belief in Jesus is the whole of what it means to be a disciple is simply not biblical.
  - o It's a part of it, and a hugely important part. If you don't believe me read Ephesians 2:1-10, or Romans 10:9-11, where it says that we are saved by grace alone through faith, apart from works. And that if we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved.
  - o But that isn't what it means to be a disciple, that's what it means to be saved, which is the first step in the life of a disciple, and the most important step (nothing whatsoever can be done without it), but it's just the beginning. The initial commitment.
  - o When Jesus showed up, He was looking for people to commit their whole lives to Him. To follow Him, to learn from His life, to be His disciples, and to teach others to do the same.
- And we see that play itself out through the rest of Matthew (and the other Gospels as well).
- Jesus goes around preaching, teaching, healing, rebuking. Large crowds of people follow Him around, but they are not all necessarily following Him as a disciple. The crowds want to hear what He has to say, or receive healing from His hands, or get food from Him to eat, but when push comes to shove and

Jesus says something they don't like, or does something they disagree with, they're gone (see John 6).

- They are not yet disciples. Because disciples are those that are:
  - o 1. All-out committed to Jesus and learning from His life
  - o 2. Committed to recruiting others to do the same.
- So Jesus' core, the 12, are with Him no matter what. They are committed to Him (except for Judas of course).
- And they are not just committed to following Him around and listening to His teachings. They were also committed to obeying Him. And what was it that He commanded them to do? The things they had seen Him doing.
- And so in passages like Matthew 10:1, and 5-8, we see Jesus telling His disciples to do the same things He did, and not only that, but He also gave them the power to do those things.

Matthew 10:1 says, "And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction."

Matthew 10:5-8, "These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay." - "The Limited Commission."

- And while it is important to note that what Jesus told His disciples to do here looked different than what He told His disciples to do later on, namely be witnesses to all people, at every stage Jesus first modeled what to do and say, and then sent His disciples out to do the same (see Matthew 10:1, 5-15; 16:24-28, 19:23-30; 28:16-20).
  - (Eventually we see that at a later time, Jesus does send His followers to the Samaritans and Gentiles (Acts 1:8), but as Paul says in Romans 1:16, the Gospel is for the Jew first and then for the Greek).
- The whole goal of discipleship, from the start, was for these young men to become like Him. To be like Him, to do the same things He did, so that, after He had accomplished everything He came to do on this earth and was gone, the work of His ministry would be able to continue on. The kingdom of God would continue to be proclaimed, people would continue to repent, so that when Jesus came back, the world would be ready for His kingdom to be fully established.
- Now, stating the mission of Jesus like this can sound like the importance of the cross is being minimized.
- Wasn't it the goal of God to show His love for us by sending His Son to die for us? After all, John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

- And that was the goal, the ultimate display of love, but if that was the whole of the story, then the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John do not make any sense.
- If Jesus dying on the cross and rising again is all that the Gospels are about, then they ought to be only a few chapters long each.
- But instead we have these books that show us the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which show us who He is for the purpose of equipping us to become like Him ourselves and to teach others to do the same.
- That's why at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, we read of the disciples receiving the Great Commission.

Matthew 28:16-20, "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

- At the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, after He suffered at the hands of sinful men, was crucified on the cross, taking all of our sin upon Himself, past, present, and future, and then rising again, so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life, Jesus gathers His disciples to Himself.
- And He tells them that He has all the power in heaven and on earth. God the Father has given Him authority and dominion over heaven, and now Satan's controlling power over the earth, death, and hell has been taken from him by Jesus through his decisive victory on the cross.
- Now that this is the case, that Jesus is reigning in power, they, his disciples, who have spent the last three years following Him, learning from Him, and doing the same types of things He did, have a mission.
- They are to go out and make more disciples. Just as they are His disciples, His followers, His learners, those who have dedicated the whole of their lives to learning from Him and becoming like Him, they are to now go out and teach others in the same way.
- They are to tell them about Him, what He has done, and when they come to believe in Him, baptize them in the name of the Trinity (an outward, physical symbol of the inward reality of dying to sin and being born again to new life in Him), and then teach them to follow everything Jesus taught them.
- And Jesus Himself is going to be with them to the end of the age, to the completion of time leading up to the full realization of His kingdom.
- And Jesus was and is with them. From the first chapter of the book of Acts we know Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem until He sent the Holy Spirit to them, His Spirit, who would come and live inside of them and give them the power to do all that He had commanded them.

- Jesus didn't tell them to do what only He can do, and then leave it up to them to do it. No, He gave them Himself, His Spirit living inside of them, to empower them to become like Him and help others do the same.
- God isn't dumb, He didn't leave the work of His kingdom up to chance (which would be impossible anyway because He is totally sovereign).
  
- This, this is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. This is what it has always meant. A disciple of Jesus is one who has committed the whole of their lives to learning to become like Jesus, to do and say the same types of things He did and said, and then to teach others to do the same.
- And we know that that was not just for the 12 apostles, because Jesus told them to make other disciples, of all nations.
- Meaning, they would go out and make disciples, teaching them to observe all that Jesus taught them, and Jesus taught them to proclaim the kingdom and to make disciples. So whoever would come to be a disciple from Jesus' disciples, would also be taught to make more disciples, because that's what it means to be a disciple.
- That has always been what it means, from the very beginning. Matthew 4, when Jesus first calls His disciples, He calls them to follow Him and that He would make them fishers of men.
- So whatever version of "Christianity" that doesn't call you to be a disciple that makes disciples, isn't real Christianity. It's something else.
- In all likelihood, if you have a different understanding of Christianity, it's because you either didn't pay attention when somebody taught it to you, or, worse, nobody taught it to you.
- Instead they taught you some other version, probably an incomplete version.
  
- One example of an incomplete and ultimately flawed version that I can think of is the version that says, "if you pray this prayer one time, go to a building owned by the church and sit in a seat once a week (if that), and then throw some money in a common pool for the organized church, you're a Christian."
- No! That's not what the Bible teaches!
- That version of "Christianity" that tells you that what you have to do is join a volunteer run community club with the name Jesus slapped on to it.
  
- There's another version that's even worse, because on the outside it looks so good, while it still results in little to no discipleship.
- It's the moral, religious approach.

- You get up early, you read your Bible, you pray, you go to work, you come home to your family, you live frugally, and you never share your faith, you hardly ever talk about Jesus outside of very specific social gatherings, and you most definitely don't initiate a relationship with someone else to help them learn what it means to become like Jesus and help others to do the same.
  - It looks a lot better on the outside and yet still results in the same thing, flawed discipleship, incomplete obedience to what your Lord and Savior has called you to be and do.
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- Church, you've got one mission, and it's to be disciples of Jesus that make other disciples of Jesus.
  - You can run all the programs you want, throw as many events as you can think of, do some great volunteer work, and if it doesn't result in making disciples, utterly fail to accomplish the mission Jesus gave you to do.
  - Look at what we are doing as a church, and if it doesn't have anything to do with making disciples who can make disciples, ask yourself, why are we doing it? Because I can tell you, if it is not either directly accomplishing that mission, or helping us by setting us up to better accomplish it, then we're not doing it because Jesus told us to.
  - We're doing it because we want to. And even if what we are doing isn't bad, but is still done in place of what we are supposed to be doing, then we'll find ourselves getting in the way of the work of the Lord. And that's not a place I want us to be.
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- All of this can sound super intimidating, and possibly discouraging, and I get why: so few of us actually live our lives this way.
  - And finding out that this is Jesus' expectation for anyone who would come after Him, can feel disorienting and deflating.
  - But it doesn't have to feel that way forever, and as you start on this journey of being a disciple that makes disciples, what you'll find is that it is quite life-giving and joy producing.
  - Jesus said in John 15:11, "These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."
  - Following the teaching and lifestyle of Jesus brings us to a play of everlasting joy, because to live as Jesus lived is to live in communion with God, who is joy, life, and peace.
  - And just as with any good thing, our enjoyment of that thing isn't complete until we have shared it with someone else.
  - That's why in 1 John 1:3-4 John writes, "that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our



fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

- You haven't really experienced the joy of something until you have shared that joy with someone else. That's why John says that he shares about Jesus so his joy can be complete.
  
- Even with that being the case, people can still feel intimidated by this call to be a disciple of Jesus who makes disciples because they have never experienced it themselves, and so they don't know what this is supposed to look like.
- To be fair to myself, I can't give you a fully detailed response to what it should look like right now because that would take hours, but I can give you some basic starting points.

### **What does this look like?**

- Life on life relationship
  - o An older or more mature Christian taking a younger or more immature Christian under their wing and sharing with them from their life what God has taught them.
  - o This relationship should be one of vulnerability, trust, encouragement, and challenge.
  - o You don't have to be an expert; you just have to be on the path to becoming more like Jesus so you can help someone else become more like Jesus.
    - You do, however, have to have a life that is worth imitating, at least in part.
- You can use curriculum and books as an aide in this pursuit, but this is not a curriculum based pursuit. The reason being is that it is not a program, so when you finish a curriculum you are not finished with discipleship.
  - o We are all continually on the path of discipleship, of maturity in Christ, until the day we die. That journey doesn't end when you've finished reading a book or going through a curriculum.
  - o That's why discipleship is life on life.
  - o You journey through life together.
- This relationship can span anywhere from 20 weeks to two years.
  - o It's a long term pursuit.
- It's built on the Gospel (the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus).
  - o The whole point is to incorporate more of the truth of the Gospel into our daily lives.

- Instead of being a shame and guilt producing relationship, it is a shame and guilt removing relationship, because Jesus took all our shame and guilt on Himself on the cross.
- Unlike small groups that never accept more members, or never split because they don't want to "lose" what they've got, discipleship relationships, like God's love, are meant to multiply and grow, so that more people can come to know and follow Jesus with their whole lives.
  - Jesus didn't stick around forever in person. He passed on His life to them, gave them His Spirit, and then sent them out.
  - So even if you don't move physical locations, you are still sent, and you are still called to a multiplication effort.