

# The Definition of Discipleship

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This reflection pursues a deeper definition of discipleship. We've defined four elements in the call of Christian discipleship: 1) it is a general call to all issued by Christ, 2) it is a call to the task of service, 3) it demands highest allegiance and involves sacrifice, and 4) it is a call to suffering. In ministry today we are challenged with identifying true disciples and defining our on-going discipleship. We live this out in the midst of family life, career, and church service. How can we most clearly define discipleship and lead others in the way?

The English word *disciple* is typically as a "follower," "student" or "learner" of a great master, teacher, or rabbi. In the New Testament, we frequently find that *disciple* is used to translate the Greek word *mathetes*. While the terminology of discipleship is scarce in the Old Testament, the concept can be found in the Hebrew words *talmid* and *limmud*. The use of *talmid* in 1 Chronicles 25:8 indicates a musical apprentice, and Isaiah 54:13 specifies *limmudim* as disciples of both Yahweh and human prophets. Though this Old Testament terminology is limited, there is evidence that close master-disciple relationships existed within the social structure of the Israel and among the prophets (specifically consider the examples of Moses and Joshua; Elijah and Elisha).

By the time Jesus arrived on the scene of first-century, disciples were considered those who followed a recognized leader, rabbi, or movement. In the gospels we find disciples of the Pharisees (Mt 22:15-16; Mk 2:18), disciples of John the Baptist (Mk 2:18) and disciples of Moses (Jn 9:24-29) in addition to the disciples of Jesus. Jesus had followers from the beginning of his public ministry. His first followers were originally disciples of John the Baptist, including Andrew and an unnamed disciple, probably John. Andrew brought his brother, Simon Peter, and Jesus next called Phillip, who in turn brought Nathaniel to Jesus. These first followers likely made up the disciples that accompanied Jesus to the wedding celebration in Cana, where they experienced his first miracle and believed.

The movement to follow Jesus began to grow in the wake of his teaching and miracles, but it is clear in Scripture that some of those following would leave him 1) when his teaching was hard to accept or 2) when they had the desire to return to things they had left behind. Some of these "disciples" were following Jesus because he was an exciting new miracle worker and teacher, but they eventually showed they had only a loose commitment to Jesus. On the contrary, the Twelve who Jesus prayed for, called and named apostles (Lk 6:13) at some point made specific commitments to leave their former life behind, follow Jesus as the Christ, and accept the tasks given them by Christ no matter what the cost, such as Peter's confession of Christ in Matthew 16:13-20 and Luke 9:18-27. While the Twelve were appointed as apostles (not only committed followers but commissioned representatives), there were larger groups of disciples that Jesus sent out, including the seventy-two sent out two by two in Luke 10:1-2, for "He told them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.'"

Jesus typically had two groups attending his ministry. The disciples were those who obeyed Jesus call to follow him. The "crowds" or "multitudes" were those to whom Jesus continued to offer the call. They were a neutral but curious group of people that were not attached in any serious way to Jesus. Though they may have followed his ministry, they did not exhibit the prerequisites of 1) paying the cost and 2) committing

themselves to the cause. They wanted healing and teaching, but could not understand Jesus ministry because they were not true believers. Jesus taught his disciples about the crowds in his parable of the soils in Matthew 13. Jesus expected such people to always be a part of his ministry, and so should his committed and commissioned followers today. However, we should also be reminded that Jesus made it his objective to teach the crowds and make them disciples. Thus, out of the crowds came both disciples and opponents. Today we should hold to Jesus form and demands of discipleship. Jesus' ministry continues to essentially include calling, training and sending out disciples.

**Disciples are called by Jesus.** We are to respond to the general call that Christ puts out to receive life. Our response includes recognition and belief in Jesus identity as Christ, obedience to his call, and counting the cost of full allegiance to him. We are to surrender the old life in response to his call to new life in the family of God.

**Disciples follow Jesus.** There is an old rabbinic phrase to a disciple, "May you always be covered in the dust of your rabbi." The concept was that a disciple would follow his teacher so closely that he would be dirty with the dust his feet kicked up from the road. Jesus is the perfectly obedient example of how we are to live, and during his life on earth he modeled what it means to live out the heart of the Law in grace and truth. Thus, we are to attach ourselves to him and learn from his words and actions in Scripture. We are to continue counting the cost of following him, surrendering our goals, dreams, motives, opinions, and property for the cause of Christ. The path of following Jesus is one of sanctification through the Holy Spirit, to become like Jesus in our character and to grow to be example to those whom we will make disciples.

**Disciples are commissioned by Jesus.** While his commission to the Twelve Apostles was unique to the early church, all disciples were given the Great Commission of Christ to 1) Make disciples "as we are going," 2) to baptize new disciples, and 3) to teach them to obey everything he has commanded. We are very literally on-going disciples of Jesus who are making disciples who will make disciples.

Throughout the gospels we see the close discipleship relationship of Jesus and the Twelve. They lived together, ate together, walked together, and talked together constantly for at least two years of life. Today we have cultural difficulty in that we do not dwell with or depend on each other as they did in first-century Palestine. In addition, we are to attach ourselves to Christ alone, and we do not have the physical God-man in our midst. To follow any other human as we are to follow Christ would not be Christian discipleship. So how should we approach discipleship today?

Disciple-makers must clearly issue the call of Jesus Christ, offering the fullness of the Gospel. The call of the Gospel is both death and resurrection: the death of Christ for our sins and his resurrection to conquer sin and death; the death of ourselves and the resurrection into new life in Christ. The Gospel is marked in Baptism, and those of us who are making disciples must present the full Gospel to the curious crowds.

For those who accept the call, we must teach the fullness of Christ commands, challenging followers to continually count the cost. Counting the cost takes various forms. The Twelve were called to give all, including family, profession, and property. All disciples are called to count the cost of allegiance, but leaving everything was not intended for all. However, we must be clear that the life of the disciple must cost us something. If it is not costing us anything, we may not be following Christ.

For those who are growing in Christ, the result of growth will be expression through Christian service. We must uphold and believe in Christ's church if we are followers of Christ. We must not only defend the church, but serve in and through Christ's Body to be the witnesses he has called us to be as we fulfill his Great Commission to all believers.

The invitation to follow Christ is an invitation to relationship with our Heavenly Father, and an invitation to receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus said in John 16:7 that it was for our good that he was going away, that we would then receive the Spirit to come alongside us, to teach, convict, counsel and comfort us. Above all, we are reminded that Jesus' Great Commission concludes with our Savior's promise, "surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Today we continue to walk with and converse with Christ, in his person, in his Spirit, and in his Church.

### **Bibliography**

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