

1. What Does it Mean to be a Disciple of Christ?

Becoming a Disciple Series

God Has Called Us to Fruitfulness

I had been a Christian for around three years when I married my wife, Sandy, in the United States at age 26. We had many dreams of what we wanted to do for Christ in those early years. We decided to abandon a comfortable life in the United States and trust God to lead us. We left America and returned to my hometown of Harwich, England, and I continued working with my father on his commercial fishing boat, the *Why Worry*. It was a very lucrative job, but money was no longer something I lived for; I wanted to lead people to the One who had changed my life and gave me meaning—the Lord Jesus. Within weeks of returning to work as a commercial fisherman catching Dover Soles, Cod, Plaice, and Flounders, I was frustrated because out on the North Sea off the East Coast of England, there was no one to talk to about Christ. I knew I couldn't continue my former lifestyle; something more burned in my heart, and the Lord spoke to me from Matthew 4:19 about leaving my nets to work on His net. Our dream as a couple to be fruitful needed a step of faith, so it was hard for me to one day tell my father that I had to leave my life at sea. It can be scary to step out into new things, but the Lord is faithful to lead and guide. I look back at that decision and thank God for His tender urging to step out of the boat of comfortableness. The initial call of Christ to His Disciples is clear: **“Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19).**

If you believe in Christ, 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, if you are a believer, you have responded to His call. Your seeking heart drew you to the Lord Jesus, but God worked in your life to awaken you to seek Him. He is the One who has started the work in you, and He is also the One who will bring it to its fulfillment. Jesus said, **“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:64).** God loved us so much that He called us into a relationship with Himself. H.A. Ironside described it well when he postulated that when we come to the gates of heaven, on the outside of the door, we would read, **“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 but 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. I think salvation in Christ is simple enough that even a child with limited knowledge can believe and put their faith in the Lord Jesus. 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 God's plan for our lives. 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 Him and His Kingdom. Eternal lives are at stake, and He needs all of us to offer our lives to Him and no longer live for ourselves.

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 said, “Come to me” – this is our choice... “And I will make

you"... this is *His* work... fishers of men! He can live through us, with us, and in us to create a richer, more meaningful, and more far-reaching life than we could ever accomplish by living for ourselves. 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 the same way Jesus lived and bear fruit for God for the rest of our lives on earth.

Jesus used the analogy of a Vine and branches. He said the Vine was a picture of Himself, and 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).

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 was responsible for **putting the Master's teaching into practice** as well as **passing his teaching along to others**. Disciples are called to champion the cause, reproduce the skills, and propagate their teacher's words and lessons. They receive their teacher's flame, carry the torch, and pass the same fire to others to run with it.

The early believers in Jesus were referred to as Nazarenes but called themselves followers of "the Way," referring most likely to Isaiah 40:3, "Prepare the Way of the Lord!" They were first called Christians, or "little Christs," in Antioch of Syria, where Paul and Barnabas taught in the Gentile Church.

From ancient times, the word 'disciple' has been used to describe passionate students 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 is

¹ Definitions are from the American Heritage Dictionary

forced to drive on the right. He must unlearn his old habit, learn a new one, and, more seriously than all, learn in heavy traffic.²

As a result of their involvement with their Master, disciples of Jesus 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*:

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); others were attracted to His teaching, miracles, and the winsomeness of His person but wanted to follow Him on their terms. Christ was uncompromising in His discipleship call:

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,

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

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

“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 firm and solemn. His answers to both of these men contain a challenge. What is that challenge?

Our self-life/flesh tends to find many reasons we should not follow the Lord wholeheartedly. Likely, the man who wanted to bury his father before following Christ had not yet had his father die! The man was asking permission from 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 showed they had not yet grasped the urgency and importance of saving lives to which Jesus was calling them. Many want to wait until conditions are perfect before following wholeheartedly. If we do not put Christ and His kingdom first in our hearts, there will always be a reason to hold back. To truly follow Him, we must be whole-hearted. Christ and His Kingdom's purposes must be our top priority in life.

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. All believers are called into His army, but many find excuses to avoid full commitment to the cause of Christ. Jesus spoke a parable about the tendency we have to make excuses and put off the call to discipleship:

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).

As an Englishman, I became a Christian while searching for meaning while visiting America in the summer of 1977, three years before meeting Sandy. I had 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 within several months, I became aware that the glow of my love for Christ was not the same as in the early days of my walk. Life became boring, which left me empty. I sensed the Lord telling me to leave and go to Israel to see some friends I had met when I became a Christian. It was risky to leave all that I had, and I battled inwardly, wondering what I would do there. I wanted something more from my life than being a seat warmer in a half-hearted local church. I didn't know what I could do or how God would use me, but it didn't seem like I was growing spiritually in the little church in my comfortable hometown. Within five months of giving my life to Christ, I sold everything I had, bought an air ticket that lasted six months and flew off to Israel.

I resolved to follow the Lord's leading wherever He led me. The choice I made back then has shaped my life to this day. I have never regretted following the Lord's leading. It was through that decision that I met those who shaped my young life in Christ. He has continued to lead me to this day. I want to stay sensitive to His voice and tender to His leadership.

Can you think of common excuses today that people make to avoid following God and choosing a life of discipleship? Are there any roadblocks you find in your life that challenge you from living a life of discipleship? Share if you are able.

Marriage, family, and business are essential to God, but they are never legitimate excuses to dodge the call of discipleship. Through discipleship, God will bring blessings to your spouse, your children, and your work life. 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 uncompromising obedience to live for Him in the power of a 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 must admit that our natural dedication and affection are 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 correctly unless we forsake our own love and receive God's love 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.”

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 understood 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 truth, 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.

We Must 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 could only 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; it is 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 He is through His indwelling Holy Spirit.

How can we fulfill our commitment to Christ? Like the tower builder, we must admit our human inadequacy, declare bankruptcy, and appeal to the mercy of a higher court. The verdict is that resources are available from outside ourselves to finish the work He started when He called you to follow Him. 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 priority in our affections and loyalty. A disciple is wholly devoted to pursuing an ongoing relationship of obedience and commitment to Christ. The goal is for us to know Him and become like Him; as we become like 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 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 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 rulership over them.

Ask the Holy Spirit to remind you whenever these things 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 must also fill your mind with the Word of God, which will influence your decision-making and desires. God's Word is creative. Television, the Internet, and other media are so prevalent in our lives that exposure 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.

We must also acknowledge that it will change our lives to surrender fully. 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 first-hand experience of spiritual warfare.
- ❑ To be a follower of Christ means there will be times you feel broken-hearted and sometimes 'broke.'
- ❑ Being a follower of Christ means facing all kinds of pressure and opinions and wading 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 desire to also share in His glory. You must be willing to be the outcast.
- ❑ To be a follower of Christ means the more 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 called Faithful and True, but 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 impact those around you as you become an example for others. "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 are 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

⁴So 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).

classic and a staple of Christmas television worldwide. The American Film Institute has recognized the movie as one of the 100 best American films ever made, placing it number one on its list of the most inspirational American films ever. Philip Van Doren Stern wrote the original story, *The Greatest Gift*, in November 1939. After being unsuccessful in publishing the story, he made 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 producer David Hempstead that it became the movie we know today. He showed it to Cary Grant's Hollywood agent; the rest is history. For those who do not know the story, it is about George Bailey, a man whose imminent suicide on Christmas Eve involves the intervention of his guardian angel, Clarence Odbody. Clarence shows George all the lives he has touched, his contributions 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 similar choices 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 yourself, a life of your 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 in one way or another. In which movie will you choose to star in? You will invest your life in making one or the other.

Prayer: "Father, I surrender myself into your loving arms. Please grant me the grace to live for you. Give me the hunger always to be a learner, a follower. Keep calling me onwards to walk with You in this life, to trust and obey."

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