

The Call to Discipleship

Intro: Our goal as a congregation is not to get people to "join" the church of Christ in some denominational sense; but rather to persuade people to become disciples of Jesus Christ. As a group we are a church of Christ; but individually we are His disciples. John described Jesus ministry in terms of discipleship: "... Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John..." (John 4:1-3)

While on earth, Jesus went about making and baptizing disciples. And at the end of his time on earth, He sent His disciples out with the same mission: Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Mt. 28:19-20)

Just as Jesus had made and baptized disciples, so He called upon His disciples to do the same. We are Jesus' disciples because of their work.

Discipleship then is at the heart of the gospel. It is not a term we hear much when people describe their relationship with Jesus; but much of what Jesus taught during his ministry centered on discipleship. As His disciples gathered around Him, He sought to make clear to them what it meant to be His disciple and to help them understand the blessings of discipleship. Today in our lessons we'll explore this topic together. Let's listen in and hear what Jesus said about discipleship.

The Meaning of Discipleship

Discipleship means diligently learning His teaching.

Notice this aspect of discipleship in the great invitation:

Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. (Mt. 11:29)

The Greek word for disciple (mathetes) is related to the Greek word meaning to learn (manthano). Discipleship in the ancient world meant adopting someone as teacher.

Consequently the disciples commonly referred to Jesus as "Rabbi," a word that means "teacher." And numerous times in the Gospels they and others address Jesus as "didaskale," an address that means "Teacher."

Jesus acknowledged the importance of that role:

"You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am."
(John 13:13)

Paul shows us that the decision to become a Christian is a commitment to learning the truth from Him.

"But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus,"
(Ephesians 4:20-21)

Being a disciple then means being a serious student of Scripture, reading His words and those of His disciples. It means wanting to

understand every principle of life He taught. Are living as a true disciple of Jesus?

In His call to discipleship Jesus taught that...

Discipleship means patterning our lives after His example.

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. (Mt. 16:24) Jesus invites us to pattern our lives after his, since it pleases the Father and will bring Him glory.

"A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher." (Luke 6:40)

That meant that we would do the kind of things that Jesus did. Jesus applied the principle to his disciples in John 13.

"If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." (John 13:14)

That also means that we may have to experience ridicule and suffering. In preparing them to preach the gospel Jesus put the disciples on notice:

"It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!" (Matthew 10:25)

Not surprisingly the early church called their religion, "the Way" because they were walking in the footsteps of the one who said, "I am the way" (Jn. 14:6)

"the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked." (1 John 2:6)

Are we living as a disciple of Jesus? Are we seeking to do what He did?

Discipleship means giving Jesus control over our lives—making Him the Lord of our lives. In his great invitation Jesus used a fascinating figure to describe our relationship with him.

Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. (Mt. 11:29)

Jesus likened those who accepted his invitation to those animals and sometimes men that were put under a yoke. Clearly the figure is intended to suggest that He is the one in control.

That invitation is not easy to accept if we insist upon having control over everything. Making Jesus Lord means self-denial for us; it means surrendering our will to His will.

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. (Mt. 16:24)

It means obeying Him. Jesus boldly insisted that people obey Him.

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock." (Matthew 7:24)

Likewise Jesus affirmed that one is fool not to! And that idea was not lost on His disciples John who wrote in his gospel:

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” (John 3:36)

He said that the proof of their love for Him was their obedience to Him.

“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” (John 14:15)

Are we learning from Him? Are we walking like Him? Are we obeying Him? Those are the hallmarks of a true disciple.

In His call to discipleship Jesus taught that...

Discipleship means total loyalty to Jesus over all others.

Many of Jesus' sayings come across as shocking because of the stark contrast that he makes between earthly priorities and heavenly ones.

Consider three "no man can be my disciple sayings" from Luke 14.

If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. (Lk. 14:26)

The text in Matthew makes clear that "hate" in this text is used in the Hebraistic sense of love less. Our loyalty to the Lord must be greater than our loyalty even to those to whom we generally are most loyal--our family.

Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. (Lk. 14:27)

To take up the cross was to experience of the shame of being a criminal as one bore the cross to execution. It is a symbol of the hardship or suffering that we must endure for Christ; and it is the one upon which we intend to die to self!

So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions. (Lk. 14:33)

Discipleship means valuing your relationship with Jesus over all material things. This doesn't mean giving away everything you own; but rather to be such that the attaining of things or the loss of things does not alter your service to Christ. You may have things; but things must not have you!

The common thread in all these sayings is simply this! He must be first!

Does Jesus have your complete loyalty? Is there something that is more important to you than serving Him?

Discipleship means making a carefully-weighed commitment to Jesus.

For Jesus, the decision to become a disciple should not be made thoughtlessly. How often do people impulsively follow someone else into something only to later regret the choice they made or quickly abandon it due to a lack of personal commitment? Jesus taught people to "count the cost."

For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost, to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and take counsel whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks terms of peace. (Lk. 14:28-32)

The decision to be a disciple is weighed intellectually; and thus the decision is one of commitment.

Luke recounts a particular day when various people in the crowds expressed their intentions of becoming one of Jesus' followers. In each case Jesus would respond in a way that made those people think about the level of their commitment.

And as they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

It is as if Jesus said, "Make sure you understand what it means to follow me wherever I go. It will not always be comfortable or easy. It may even mean that you won't even have a place to sleep.

And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Permit me first to go and bury my father." But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God."

Jesus would have never advocated abandoning a recently deceased parent and leaving someone else to honor them with a proper burial. In this case, it would appear that the potential disciple is postponing discipleship until the death of a relative takes place. Presumably their intentions were noble, maybe thinking of the need for care, etc. But in Jesus' mind, there was a greater priority. And some suggest that we should not attempt to soften Jesus' language at all. It is as if he said, "Even legitimate earthly pursuits like burying the dead do not have precedence over following me."

And another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." (Lk. 9:57-62)

Perhaps in that simple phrase, "first permit me to say good-bye" Jesus could hear someone giving second-place status to discipleship; and that was enough for him to give the warning

that no one looking back is fit for the kingdom of God. The work of the kingdom should not be delayed for anything else. What it seems these verses are saying is that the preeminent concern of our lives is not having a good place to live or to meet legitimate earthly responsibilities; but to worship Him and do His work! This may mean inconvenience; it demands immediate attention over all other concerns of life! Are we willing to do that?

Conclusion: This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. As Christians this is the life we are striving to live.

If you are not a Christian, this is the life Jesus calls you to live. So weigh your decision carefully. But if you are seeking something greater than having fun, accumulating stuff, climbing the social or corporate ladder, then discipleship is the way to go. If you want a life of challenge; if you want a more fulfilling life, don't doubt that you will regret your decision. One day you will be living in the presence of God forever.

The great deception of this world is that you can attain that state without being a disciple of Jesus. The truth is, you cannot!