

What It Means to Be a Disciple of Jesus

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. While on earth, Jesus went about making disciples (Jn. 4:1) and before he left earth, he urged his apostles to go and make disciples of all the nations.

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)

Much then of what Jesus taught during his ministry had to do with discipleship. As his disciples gathered around Him, He sought to make clear to them what it meant to be His disciple. Let's listen in and hear what Jesus said.

What does discipleship mean?

Discipleship means making Jesus Lord of our lives.

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 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 you insist upon having control over everything.

Making Jesus Lord means self-denial for us.

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)

Discipleship means diligently learning Jesus' teaching.

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 disciple, mathetes, is related to the Greek word meaning to learn, manthano. Discipleship in the ancient world meant adopting someone as teacher. So Jesus invites us to let him instruct us about the right way to live.

Discipleship means patterning our lives after Jesus' 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.

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!

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 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 do His work! This may mean inconvenience; it demands immediate attention over all other concerns of life!

When we read the words about "counting the cost" we may be left with uncertainty about whether it is doable for us. If Jesus is asking so much, is he not discouraging us from making this decision? In the face of these warnings, why should we want to become a disciple of Jesus?

But why should we want to become a disciple of Jesus?

Each of the demands of discipleship brings great blessing to us.

The choice to deny self and make Jesus Lord is to truly find ourselves.

For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. (Mt. 16:25)

And Jesus promises that His yoke is easy and His burden is light; and it will bring rest to our souls.

The choice to learn from Jesus is to possess clarity and direction in life.

His teaching will give us clarity.

Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (Jn. 8:31-32)
His teaching will give us direction.

Again therefore Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life." (Jn. 8:12)

The choice to follow Jesus is to please and glorify the Father so that He in turn will exalt us with Jesus.

His prayer for his disciples was:

Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am, in order that they may behold My glory, which Thou hast given Me; for Thou didst love Me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:24)

And Paul writes:

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him. (Rom. 8:16-17)

The choice to put him first over every earthly thing is to inherit all things heavenly.

Jesus assures us that no sacrifice we make for discipleship will go unrewarded both in this life and in the life to come.

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life. (Mt. 19:29)

And he has taught that there will be a great judgment in which we will at last be recompensed to our actions in this life.

For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds. (Mt. 16:26-27)

Conclusion: 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!