

11 July 2018

Life Seminar: Disciple

Session One: Who is a Disciple?

This is a question that is of vital importance. We may ask, “Why?” To answer that question, I want to quote the words of Jesus Christ on his last day on earth. Jesus tells his disciples, “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.” (Matthew 28:19-20) Theologians and Christians have called this passage *The Great Commission*, because it is the commissioning of the disciples to preach the Gospel to everyone and make disciples and instruct them.

In his last words on earth, Jesus gives the church its mission: make disciples. The church’s mission is not *necessarily* to feed the poor. The church’s mission is not *necessarily* to serve the community. The church’s mission is not *necessarily* to stand up for the outcast. The church’s mission is to *make disciples*. If you are a Christian, your mission and duty and privilege is to *make disciples*. This is Jesus’s clear and final command to the church. Now, I do not mean that the church *should not or cannot* do the things I just mentioned. However, it is not *the* mission.

If Jesus’s last words contained the mission of the church then it is of paramount importance that we not only understand the mission but the nature of the mission. It is with this desire that we will discuss the question, “Who is a Disciple?” first.

Who is a disciple? If the mission that Jesus has given to the church is to make disciples, it would behoove us to understand what a disciple is. To answer this question, we are going to *briefly* examine the context of the word. It does not take long for the word disciple or discipleship to pop up in discussions within the Christian community. Many definitions and usages will appear, and most of them are decent, but not completely correct.

ASK THE QUESTION: WHAT ARE COMMON WAYS YOU HAVE HEARD DISCIPLE DEFINED?

The Jewish Context of a Disciple

Remember that Jesus is Jewish, coming from the Jewish people as the Jewish Messiah (anointed one) to the Jewish people. Of course, God’s plan of redemption includes the Gentiles (Ephesians 2:11-22). But, we must remember the context, for that gives us a clue as to who a disciple is. The Hebrew word used

for disciple is *talmid*. To give you an idea of the separation that exists between our present-day understanding of disciple and that of Jesus's, I quote Craig Hartman from his book *Through Jewish Eyes*,

One who sought to be a *talmid* in Jesus's day wanted not only to follow the rabbi and be just like him in all aspects of his life but also to be just like him in his relationship with God and in his view of God's Word. In this pursuit, he was willing to give up everything—even his life—to be like the rabbi.

This commitment was big investment of time and relationship. Typically, for several years the *talmid* lived with the rabbi twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred sixty days a year (the Jewish calendar has five fewer days in the year). He observed how the rabbi answered certain questions, how he handled various situations, how he presented himself, how others saw him, and whether people were drawn to him. The *talmid* learned intimate details about the rabbi's personality and character. It was not just following the rabbi but actually being the rabbi, reproducing or replicating him. That was the goal.

The *talmid* didn't attend class and then go home. The scenario was as if you, the reader, followed a particular teacher of the next three or four years. You would live with jim and watch his every move, see how he described the Bible to you, and observe how he lived his life. The goal would be to be just like the teacher, becoming him in every way.

Eventually, the *talmid* was ready, and the rabbi said, 'Okay, the time has come. Now you go and make *talmidim* (pl. of *talmid*) of your own.' He was called to reproduce. Note the pattern. The *talmid* left his family, left his *insula*, left his trade, left all. He paid any price to be like the rabbi. When he was ready, the rabbi told him to go and make *talmidim* of others. You would make other disciples of your own who would be like him because they would be like you." [Craig Hartman, *Through Jewish Eyes* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2010), 46-47.]

I realize that that was a lengthy quote, but we can summarize it in the following ways:

- The *talmid* left everything to be with the rabbi all the time.
- After several years the rabbi would deem the *talmid* mature and would send him off to make his own *talmid*.

Does this sound familiar? It should, for it is exactly what Jesus did in the Gospels (with a slight variation, which we will address presently).

A disciple (*talmid*) is one who follows Jesus and helps others follow Jesus. Mark Dever summarizes it like this, “To be a Christian means to be a disciple. There are no Christians who are not disciples. And to be a disciple of Jesus means to follow Jesus. There are no disciples of Jesus who are not following Jesus.

Ticking a box on a public opinion poll, or sincerely labeling yourself with the religion of your parents, or having a preference for Christianity as opposed to other religions—none of these things make you a Christian.” [Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 15.]

We see, then, that a disciple is one who follows Jesus.

The Biblical Entrance of the Disciple

We need to zoom in, however, to see who a disciple is specifically, or more accurately, who a disciple is biblically. A Christian is a follower of Jesus, but how does one follow Jesus? How does one *become* a follower of Jesus? Do they simply wake up and think, “I think I’ll follow Jesus today!”

We are going to take an even briefer look at how one becomes a disciple. We can summarize this in four words: God, man, Christ, and response. This is original to Greg Gilbert in his book *What is the Gospel?* I’ll simply provide a few of his chapter titles and then make a brief comment or two on each.

1. God the Righteous Creator: God created everything. As Creator, he gave specific commands for mankind to follow.
2. Man the Sinner: When man failed to obey God he doomed the entire race to sin and death. He is incapable of saving himself or remedying the situation. He is, on his own, hopeless.
3. Jesus Christ the Savior: God in the flesh, Jesus came to save humans by dying on the cross, justifying them by raising from the dead, and living forever to make intercession.
4. Response—Faith and Repentance: Through God’s gift of salvation, man is saved through faith and repentance.

In summary, a disciple is one who is saved by Jesus through faith and repentance and is now following the Savior.

Following Jesus

Now that we have laid the ground work of the context of the word *disciple* and who a disciple is, now let’s pave a road of what following Jesus is.

We are operating on the framework that one is a believer (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38; and Romans 5:1-11). One has been born again (John 3:3, 16). One has been brought out of darkness into God's marvelous light (1Peter 2:9). They are Christians (Acts 11:26), those who follow Jesus (Luke 9:57-62).

Here is a rough outline of what a disciple is. Again, we will address the specifics in more detail as we progress through this series.

1. A disciple is an individual that is born again (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38)

Since we have already touched on this, we will simply leave it at this.

2. A disciple is an individual who consumes God's Word:

- a. A disciple hears the Word of God (Luke 8:21; 11:28; Romans 10:17; 1 Timothy 4:13)

A disciple is one who longs to hear God's Word preached. While stories and illustrations help communicate the message (Jesus used them, for example), understanding and hearing God's Word is what the disciple looks forward to.

- b. A disciple reads the Word of God (Matthew 4:4; 2 Timothy 3:16; Psalm 119:18)

There are numerous Scriptures that attest the importance of regular reading of God's Word, and we will discuss this point in more detail in the upcoming weeks.

- c. A disciple meditates on the Word of God (Psalm 1:1-3; Joshua 1:8)

It is not enough to just hear or read God's Word. A disciple meditates on it, thinks about it, *chews the cud*.

- d. A disciple obeys the Word of God (John 14:15; James 1:22)

I love how the ESV Systematic Theology Bible sums up Psalm 119 and how believers should enjoy the Bible:

"How do we thankful humans respond to such words from their Maker and Redeemer? We value the Word as much as riches (vv. 14, 72, 127); we obey the law of the LORD whole-heartedly (vv. 1-8); we desire it strongly, both loving (vv. 97, 113b, 127) and longing for it (vv. 40, 131). We say, 'How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!' (v. 103). Each of us delights in God's testimonies (vv. 14, 47), saying, 'They are the joy of my heart' (v. 111), and in doing so find deliverance (v. 92). We meditate upon God's precepts until they become a part of our lives (vv. 15, 97, 99), as God's promises and rules lead us to worship him (vv.38, 62)." [Crossway, *The ESV Systematic Theology Bible*, ESV Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 700.]

3. A disciple is an individual who communes with God in prayer (Matthew 6:5, 6, 7, 9; Luke 18:1; Col. 4:2)

4. A disciple is an individual who is becoming more like Jesus: Ephesians 4:13

This is the goal, like we mentioned at the beginning. We want to be like Rabbi Jesus. I mentioned above that Jesus was like the rabbis of his day by having disciples (*talmidim*), with one caveat. In Jesus's day, *talmidim* would find and ask to follow rabbis. Avoth 5:21 states, "He [Yehudah ben Teima] used to say: Five years [is the age] for [the study of] Scripture, Ten [is the age] for [the study of] Mishnah, Thirteen [is the age] for [observing] commandments, Fifteen [is the age] for [the study of] Talmud, Eighteen [is the age] for the [wedding] canopy, Twenty [is the age] for pursuit, Thirty [is the age] for [full] strength, Forty [is the age] for understanding, Fifty [is the age] for [giving] counsel, Sixty [is the age] for mature age, Seventy [is the age] for a hoary head, Eighty [is the age] for [superadded] strength, Ninety [is the age] for [a] bending [stature], One hundred, is [the age at which one is] as if dead, passed away, and ceased from the world." [https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.5.21?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en, accessed 14 June 2018]

But, you may immediately remember the stark difference between Jesus and the rabbis of his day.

Matthew 4:18-22; Matthew 9:9 both show that Jesus sought out his disciples (reminds us of John 15:15 where Jesus tells the disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you”).

So, who is a disciple? A disciple is one who follows Jesus and helps others follow Jesus. Are you a disciple?