

Discipleship (L2): A Study of History and Application

Introduction

To be a disciple of Jesus is an exciting venture. It is to enter into a lifestyle that brings wholeness and fulfillment. It is to maximize our potential, fulfill our destinies and discover our true selves. Discipleship, however, is not always understood in this way. To those outside the church, the word has an archaic ring. In a [culture](#) that values individual [freedom](#), personal truth and unrestricted choice, the whole idea of trusting oneself to another is frightening. Those inside the church are not free from these same reactions. They often equate discipleship with words such as *discipline, obedience, constraint, self-denial, hardship, sacrifice* and *martyrdom*—all words that have negative connotations in a culture given over to self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment. Each of us needs to probe what the word *discipleship* feels like to us. Is the idea of discipleship a burden or a joy to us? What images do we have of disciples? Are these positive or negative? How we answer will affect how we understand and *apply* the precepts of discipleship.

I. Discipleship in the First-Century World (A Biblical Historical Perspective)¹

In light of such questions and reactions, it is important to investigate the biblical roots of the concept of discipleship. In the Old Testament, apart from a few references (for example, [1 Chron. 25:8](#); [Isaiah 8:16](#); [Isaiah 50:4](#); [Isaiah 54:13](#)), there is little explicit teaching about discipleship. However, it is evident that the relationship between prophets and their followers was often that of master-disciple, even though it is not specifically defined in this way (see [1 Samuel 19:20-24](#); [2 Kings 4:1, 38](#); [2 Kings 9:1](#); [Jeremiah 36:32](#)).

In the New Testament there is abundant discussion of what it means to be a disciple. This is not surprising since discipleship was a common phenomenon in the first-century world. Greek philosophers had disciples, as did the Pharisees ([Matthew 22:15-16](#)), not to mention John the Baptist ([Mark 2:18](#); [John 1:35](#)). The Jews, on occasion, referred to themselves as disciples of Moses ([John 9:27-28](#)). In these relationships, disciples were understood to be individuals committed to a particular person so as to learn that person's teaching or way of life and then to follow a particular pattern of life, whether by living in a certain way, passing on the teaching to others or engaging in political or religious activities. Jesus and his disciples shared this common understanding of the relationship between teacher and disciple. Thus to follow Jesus meant **to do** what Jesus did (replicate his [ministry](#); for example, [Mark 6:7-13, 30](#); [Luke 10:1-20](#)) and **to believe** what Jesus taught (obey his word; for example, [John 8:31-32](#); [John 17:6](#)).

The same two characteristics hold true today for those of us who would be Jesus' disciples. *First, to be a disciple of Jesus is to be involved in ministry.* The nature and character of that ministry varies greatly: from voluntary ministry to [tentmaking](#) ministry to ordained ministry. The important point is not what we do but that we understand our task in life to be one of ministry. This will mean that we engage in that task with a consciousness that we are called to it by God, that we seek to honor and serve God in this task and that we exhibit the characteristics of a

¹ Discipleship, The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity

disciple of Jesus while engaged in our task. *Second*, to be a disciple of Jesus is *to engage in ongoing examination, analysis and application of Scripture*. In this way we come to know who God is, what God requires of us and how to live as God's people. As we go about this task of developing and sharpening our Christian worldview, we will also investigate the whole range of knowledge, understanding that God is the God of truth and that all truth is God's truth.

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II. Discipleship in the Gospels

It was also true in the first century that the nature of one's discipleship depended on the nature of one's master. It is the master who determines the content of discipleship. So while the relationship between Jesus and his disciples shared connections with traditional understandings of discipleship, it also had a unique character all of its own, which was derived from who Jesus was and what he taught. Hence it becomes important to examine the Gospels in order to define the special character of the discipleship to which Jesus called men and women.

First, it is clear that the original relationship between Jesus and his followers was understood to be that of master and disciples. The word *disciple* occurs some 269 times in the New Testament with almost all the references found in the Gospels and Acts.

Second, Jesus had various types of disciples, ranging from the Twelve who were appointed to be apostles ([Mark 3:13-19](#)), to the Seventy (-two) who were sent out on a specific mission by Jesus ([Luke 10:1-20](#)), to the others who followed him ([Matthew 27:57](#); [Luke 6:17](#); [Luke 9:59-62](#); [Luke 23:49](#), [55](#)), and including the crowds, some of whom eventually left when his teaching became too hard for them to accept ([John 6:60](#), [66](#)). It is significant that a number of women were counted as Jesus' disciples, even traveling with him at times ([Luke 8:1-3](#)), despite the fact that women generally were seen as second-class citizens in the Greek and Jewish culture of the time. Later on, as the church expanded, women become quite prominent in its growth, governance and development.

Third, the relationship between Jesus and the Twelve is the example of discipleship about which we know the most and provides the best place to discern the unique characteristics of Jesus' call to it. In fact, this is interesting more generally because it quickly becomes clear they were not spiritual giants. As far as we can tell, they were quite ordinary first-century Jewish laymen with traditional theological views.

Each of the four Gospels describes the discipleship of the Twelve. While there is much common material, each Gospel highlights different aspects of discipleship. In Matthew we find a manual on discipleship. In particular, the Sermon on the Mount gives explicit instructions for living a kingdom lifestyle: instructions that are often at odds with prevailing cultural attitudes ([Matthew 5:1-7:28](#)). In Mark we find the concept of disciples as servants—those who give themselves for the sake of others ([Mark 8:27-10:45](#)). In Luke following Jesus is synonymous with discipleship, but to follow Jesus requires counting the cost ([Luke 9:23-26](#), [57-62](#); [Luke 14:25-33](#)): it is to give up other attachments (such as [wealth](#)) and, instead, to love God and others ([Luke 10:25-37](#)). In John the key characteristic of discipleship is acceptance of Jesus' claims about who he is. Here the three marks of the true disciple are abiding in Jesus' word ([John 8:31-32](#)), love for others ([John 13:34](#)) and a fruit-bearing life ([John 15:8](#)).

So for those of us who seek to be Jesus' disciples today, we do well to ponder the (still) puzzling call in Matthew to a countercultural lifestyle in which the poor and the meek are called blessed; in which mercy, purity and peacemaking are commended; in which persecution is to be expected; in which murder and lust are shown to begin as attitudes of the heart; in which turning the other cheek and walking the extra mile are marks of discipleship; and in which we are called to love even our enemies. We learn from Mark that the characteristic of discipleship is sacrificial love for others, a love that demands no return. In Luke we are faced with the challenge of other loyalties. What, in fact, determines our behavior? Is it love for Jesus or love of money (power, possessions, sex, etc.)? From John we learn of the vital importance of accepting Jesus for who he is, not for whom we would like him to be. We are challenged to follow the one who is the Bread of Life; the Light of the World; the way, truth and life; the Good Shepherd; the resurrection and the life; and the vine (of which we are branches).

Fourth, the end result of being Jesus' disciples is [friendship](#) with him. This is quite amazing and moves beyond traditional understandings of discipleship. In speaking to the Twelve Jesus said, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. . . . You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants. . . . Instead, I have called you friends" ([John 15:12-15](#)).

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III. The Unique Character of Discipleship to Jesus

Taken as a whole, three distinct characteristics emerge that define the disciples of Jesus in addition to the general characteristics of first-century discipleship: (1) calling and following: to be Jesus' disciple is to hear his call and to heed it by following him; (2) counting the cost: to be Jesus' disciple means to bear our cross; and (3) commitment: to be Jesus' disciple is to enter into a relationship with him.

1. *Calling and following.* It was common in the first century for potential disciples to seek out a rabbi with whom they wished to study. In contrast, Jesus called people to himself ([Matthew 8:22](#); [Matthew 16:24](#); [Matthew 19:21](#); [Mark 1:17](#)). Furthermore, he urged his disciples to call others to follow him. "Make disciples" is the core command in the Great Commission ([Matthew 28:19](#)).

Jesus' call was to enter into a new way of living. This is best defined by the Great Commandment: " 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' . . . 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" ([Mark 12:29-31](#)). Thus the disciples of Jesus are called to a threefold path of love: loving God, loving themselves and loving others. That love at the center of the commandment points to the significance of giving our full attention as disciples to all our relationships. That we are called upon to love God in this all-encompassing way points to the fact that nurturing our spiritual lives is at the center of our discipleship. We are to love God with our whole beings: with our hearts (from the center of our being, which includes thinking and feeling), with our [souls](#) (which connotes physical and psychological energy), with our minds (intellectual activity) and with our strength

(physical and material capabilities including our wealth). All aspects of life are meant to come under the lordship of Jesus.

2. *Counting the cost.* The cost of discipleship continues to be a challenge to all who would follow Jesus. It is Jesus who said, “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” ([Matthew 10:37-39](#)). The importance of the final sentence in this statement is that it is the most frequently cited saying of Jesus in the New Testament. These are puzzling words, for we know that Jesus calls us to love others (and [family](#) is a priority) and that he chastises the Pharisees for using religious excuses for failing to care for family ([Mark 7:9-13](#)). In his typical, hyperbolic way, Jesus may be telling us that we need to leave our dependence on family so as to be able to love them truly. These are also strong words that haunt us as we compare our comfortable, safe, fulfilling lives to the lives of the early Christians, who came to assume that to be a Christian was to be a martyr. How can we live with the stringent demands of discipleship?

In response, some speak of “radical discipleship.” By this some mean living in an antimaterialistic way so as to serve the poor and fight injustice (Bonhoeffer; Sugden; Wallis). Others use this term in a more individualistic way, understanding radical discipleship to be a life of active ministry (preaching, teaching, evangelizing) and of a committed “walk” with Jesus (Ortiz; Bridges), that is, Bible study, prayer, [worship](#).

Counting the cost has to do with priorities as much as anything. To what do we give ourselves—affirmation and acceptance? reputation and power? sensual indulgence and pleasure? knowledge or leisure? We face a long list of options in modern life. To follow Jesus is to choose (no matter how imperfectly) to give Jesus priority in life over against all these other options.

3. *Commitment.* At the core of discipleship is relationship with Jesus. Jesus called his followers not just to his teaching but to himself ([John 15](#)). This will involve coming to know who Jesus is in the full sense.

Commitment to Jesus will also involve an active attempt to cultivate a vital relationship with him. One aim of the [spiritual disciplines](#) is to help us develop just such a lifestyle. The devotional activities to which we give ourselves will involve, at least, the kind of Bible study and prayer that is an active dialogue with Jesus through which we experience the love, guidance and presence of the one we follow.

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IV. Living as a Disciple (Of Practicality / Application)

On a practical level, discipleship is commonly understood within the Christian community to be a particular program of learning rather than a holistic way of life. But the contemporary challenge is not just to participate in schemes that seek to teach discipleship; it is to conduct our whole lives as conscious disciples of Jesus. In fact, one author defines discipleship as “living a fully human life in this world in union with Jesus Christ and growing in conformity to his image”

(Wilkins, p. 42). If our whole life is meant to reflect our active discipleship, this will involve the following choices and activities.

1. *The use of time.* With the average adult American working longer hours and, in addition, watching an average of twenty-five hours of [television](#) a week, [time](#) has become our most precious commodity. Yet it takes time to cultivate a life of discipleship. We need to develop regular patterns of prayer, study and reflection that become an integral part of our schedules. In addition, we need to learn to use the gaps in our day for reflection and prayer: driving to work, [waiting](#) in line, lunch, time before going to [sleep](#) and so on. As well we need to master the art of openness to God while working, much as Brother Lawrence did in the monastery kitchen.
2. *The use of means.* Given our overwrought schedules, we must take advantage of those vehicles for growth that are open to us. In particular, [small groups](#) that meet on a regular basis for the purpose of spiritual growth seem to fit with both our need for regular spiritual activity and our need for the support of others as we seek to be disciples of Jesus (see [Church](#); [Church in the Home](#); [Community](#)). We also need to engage with others in a church for the purpose of learning, [fellowship](#), celebration of the Lord's Supper and prayer—as was the practice of the first disciples ([Acts 2:42](#)). A church community also gives us opportunity for service.
3. *The use of vocation.* We need to learn what it means to consider our jobs not just as means of earning a living but as the area in which to minister as disciples of Jesus.
4. *The use of spiritual disciplines.* We need to rediscover the practices of the church down through the centuries by which men and women sought to cultivate a life of discipleship: meditation, fasting, solitude, confession, worship, prayer, study, celebration, discernment and simplicity.

In all this there must be conscious intentionality, the willingness to engage in the process of growth rather than seek instant growth and to engage in life in community with others on the same path. To live in this way is to live as a disciple of Jesus.

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