



What Discipleship Is and Is Not

Christ's mandate to make disciples is meant for every one of His followers.

By Lesli White

Jesus' final instruction to His followers was "go and make disciples". Jesus made disciples, the disciples made disciples and their disciples made disciples. Jesus' method of making disciples was focused more on relationships and action and less on information and knowledge. But in an age where church no longer seems relevant or helpful – or even good – to many people, so many are leaving and losing site of Jesus' call. On top of this, many of those who make it to Sunday service are biblically illiterate, lack commitment to evangelism and mission, and have shallow faith.

It's important as followers of Christ to understand what discipleship is and what discipleship is not so we are able to fulfill the Great Commission.

By definition, a disciple is a follower, one who accepts and assists in spreading the doctrines of another. A Christian disciple is a person who accepts and assists in the spreading of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Christian discipleship is the process by which disciples grow in Jesus Christ and are equipped by the Holy Spirit, who resides in our hearts, to overcome the pressures and trials of this present life and become more Christ-like. Discipleship is not knowing more information about Jesus, but knowing Jesus and being transformed into His image through the constant exposure of the Gospel of grace. Discipleship calls us to live by faith in Him in the everydayness of life by the Holy Spirit's power.

Jesus made disciples by spending time observing potential disciples. Before calling potential disciples into development, He interacted with them in a variety of settings and situations. He didn't provide a syllabus, a PowerPoint guide or a template to follow. Jesus taught discipleship along the way and gave them a mission to complete. He challenged the disciples to embrace a life fulfilling God's call.

He used the things around Him to teach discipleship like the birds and the lilies. Discipleship naturally happened simply from a group of people hanging out and growing together. And don't think discipleship happened over night. Jesus spent three years developing 12 men, 24 hours out of the day, seven days a week, 365 days out of the year. In this process, Jesus treated each disciple as an individual – He confronted Peter, He loved John, He challenged Thomas. Jesus told Peter that everyone has their own, individualized path to discipleship. We do too.

To understand what discipleship is on a deeper level, it's important that we also understand what discipleship is not.

It's not a small care group of men and women who will cry on each other's shoulders because of trials and struggles. While this is a part of it, this is not the main goal of discipleship. It's also not about the numbers. Whether you have 3 or 20 in discipleship group, what matters most is the quality of relationships you build with one another and the quality of the relationship each person has with God. Grace-based discipleship frees us up to engage in meaningful and authentic relationships. When two (or three, or four), broken people come together and have nothing to hide, no one to impress, no mask they are trying to put on, it becomes so much easier to engage in honest relationships. And honest relationships are at the center of effective discipleship.

The New Testament paints a strikingly simple portrait of disciple-making. Jesus called people to follow Him. After Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, these people devoted themselves, to fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer. They responded to Jesus' call by calling others to follow Jesus and join their community. As the church grew, it reproduced into small gatherings where believers continued to make disciples who make disciples. This model is also one that we can apply to our lives as we return discipleship to the frontlines of our faith.

Another important thing to understand about discipleship is that it's not forced. It is best fostered through organic conversations that love people as whole people in life where we live out our faith. When we became Christians, we signed up to become like Jesus, to do the stuff that Jesus did. It's also not about making your own disciples. We shouldn't focus on being the leader of the group – Jesus is. It's imperative that we point people to Christ, not to our own lives. Being a Christian disciple involves personal growth. Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the Gospel will save it" (Mark 8:34-36). We are called to put Jesus first in all things. If we are going to be Disciples of Christ, we need to be set apart from the world and the things that separate us from God. Our focus should be on reflecting Jesus in every area of our lives. Instead of being self-centered, we should be Christ-centered. Being a disciple also requires that we have love for other disciples. Jesus gave us a new command to love one another as He loved us and "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). Love is an action so we must

reflect love in our being and how we relate to others. Our attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ. His life is a perfect example of everything we should do in our Christian walk.

Jesus calls us to go and be disciples, to share our lives more fully with others. As we take the plunge, we will discover the rich, meaningful life that Jesus has in mind for all people. The original calling of the church was to be a gathered, united community that demonstrates the transforming love of God by sharing all things in common and taking care of one another and their neighbors. We are encouraged, strengthened and challenged in community. When we apply disciple-making tactics to our lives, we can better spread Jesus' teachings to all the nations of the world.

Here is what the Bible has to say with scripture on discipleship:

Matthew 28:19-20 (NKJV) -19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

Matthew 10:24 (NKJV) -24 A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.

Luke 6:40 (AMP) -40 A pupil is not superior to his teacher, but everyone [when he is] completely trained (readjusted, restored, set to rights, and perfected) will be like his teacher.

Luke 14:33 (NKJV) -33 So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.

Matthew 10:37-39 (NKJV) -37 He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. 38 And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. 39 He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.

John 12:26 – If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

John 13:35 – By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

John 8:12 – Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Job 36:11 – If they listen and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness.

John 14:21 – Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.

John 8:31-32 – So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

John 15:8 – By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Matthew 16:24-25 – Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

2 Timothy 4:1-2 – I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.