

Demands of Discipleship

Is there a difference between a Christian and a disciple? The answer to that is easy. They are, as far as the New Testament is concerned, identical. In fact, the followers of Jesus were known initially as “*disciples*” and not called Christians until later. Read Acts 11:26.

To the early Christians the words “Christian” and “disciples” are synonyms, that is they mean the same thing. In Acts 6 we read that the number of “disciples” increased to the point where some of them felt they were being ignored so the Disciples, with a capital “D,” appointed others to care for them. The phrase “disciples increased” was a designation for the number of individuals who made a commitment to Jesus, or what we would call today “Christians.” There was no distinction between a Christian and a disciple.

Historically the church has distinguished between the 12-original disciples, often written with a capital “D” and the rest of us who are current ‘disciples’ with a small “d”.

The word “disciple” is often understood to mean “learner”, denoting one sat at the feet of another to learn. The word, however, carried a more comprehensive meaning that included a life of following the one you were to learn from.

There are those who suggest that one becomes a “Christian” when one accepts Jesus as Savior, which is certainly true, and then goes on to become a “disciple” when one makes a further, deeper commitment to Jesus. That implies that Jesus has two level of acceptable followers, an idea never suggested in the New Testament.

When Jesus commissioned His followers to go into the world, He did not ask them to make Christians and then to make disciples of a few. That is not what Jesus said. Read Matthew 28:19.

Today Jesus wants all who know Him as Savior to know they are also His disciple. When God calls us unto Himself, He calls us to discipleship. The moment you trusted in Jesus you were, in His eyes, a “disciple.” Are we willing to be true disciples?

Note, one cannot be a disciple of Jesus if he is not first a follower of Him. There are too many in the church around the world who are pretending to be Christians and really are not. They are associating with Christians in the hopes that if they demonstrate they can be good at it, God will accept them. In truth, one becomes a Christian or disciple by accepting Jesus as Savior. There is no other way.

The question for today is, having switched sides from being a disciple of Satan to one of Jesus, what does it take to be a good disciple? We don’t have to guess at that at all. The New Testament lays out practices that are expected of every Christian or disciple. In the New Testament we find a long list of activities that disciples engage in, including prayer, the study of the Word, the sharing of our faith, stewardship of our possessions, caring for other disciples etc...

I want to focus on 4 characteristics that Jesus declared were signs of true discipleship. He has not left us to guess at what is expected if we are to be His disciples. In His own teachings Jesus made it clear what He expected of them, and no less is expected of us today.

The first expectation is found in John 8:31 where we read that Jesus said, **“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.”** The first characteristic of a disciple is *Absolute Obedience* to His Word. This is not sinless perfection but a love for His word, a desire to be what He wants us to be, to avoid what He tells us to avoid, to do what He asks us to do, and to trust Him for what He has promised,. If we are going to be the faithful disciple He has called us to be we must be obedient to His Word. We cannot be a faithful disciple if we deliberately ignore or disobey Him. The first characteristic then of a disciple, according to Jesus, is *Absolute Obedience*.

The second, again from His own words, is found in John 13:35 where we read **“By this shall all men know you are my disciples, if you love one another.”** *Abounding Love*. In Acts we read that one of the things that amazed the non-Christian world was how the believers loved one another. Read I John 4:7-1.

Love is not just an emotion that we feel when we are with someone special to us. It is the overflow of the love of God in our hearts. It is a determination to allow Him to love through us. It becomes a characteristic of discipleship when we spend time with Him so we experience His love personally in a deeper way so in turn we will want to love those around us. Loving as disciples involves not only loving the lovely but also loving the unlovely, for that is how we were when God first loved us. One of the unique characteristics of the family of God should be how close we are to one another as we serve together as disciples of Jesus. When was the last time you asked God for grace to really love someone whom you would otherwise find no reason to love? Being a disciple involves not only obedience to God’s Word but *Abounding Love* for all.

Absolute Obedience and *Abounding Love* are the first two characteristics of a disciple. The third, again directly from Jesus, is *Abundant Fruitfulness*. John 15:8 reads, **“This is my father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourself to be my disciples.”** Jesus was talking here about the *Fruit of the Spirit*, the transformation that comes about as we allow His Spirit to make us into Christ-like individuals. The popular acrostic WWJD of a few years ago is more than a neat saying that caught on. It should be the goal of the Christian life. To be like Jesus is to exhibit in everyday living the fruit of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Read Galatians 5:22 for Paul’s list of that fruit. They are the characteristics of one who is truly seeking to be a follower or disciple of Jesus

Disciples are those who are growing spiritually. It is a process that will take a lifetime, but it happens only when we make a serious commitment to being disciples who are willing to spend time in fellowship with Him, in His Word and the community of disciples called the church.

Jesus never said it would be easy following Him or being a disciple. God, who gave everything for us, wants us in turn to give Him all we are. He wants us to obey His word, to love one another and to be growing spiritually.

There is one final characteristic of a disciple. In Luke 14:26-33 Jesus described disciples as those who have committed everything to His love and love Him more than anyone or anything else. That passage concludes with “**And anyone who does not carry his cross cannot be my disciple.**” This is *Absolute Surrender* to him. This is seeing no commitment as too great, and no sacrifice as too much. It is putting Him ahead of all other desires. He comes first in our relationships, in our goals for life, in the use of the talents we have and the strength He has given. It is *Absolute Surrender*.

That verse is perhaps one of the most downplayed of any of the recorded commands of Jesus. Today many look at this as if Jesus was simply saying “*You must be willing to put up with inconveniences for my sake.*” We hear things like someone with a bad cold saying, “*Well that’s my cross.*” Someone in a difficult relationship says, “*It’s my cross to bear.*” No one who heard Jesus make that statement thought of a bad cold or tough situation at work. They knew exactly what Jesus was saying. In Jesus’ day hundreds of individuals were crucified and everyone of them was forced to carry his own cross to that crucifixion. That is why, shortly after Jesus made this statement, we read of Jesus carrying His Cross to Golgotha.

When Jesus declared, “**And anyone who does not carry his cross cannot be my disciple,**” He was telling us that we must be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice and, if need be, die for Him. His call was for *absolute surrender* of everything, even to the point of carrying your own cross to your crucifixion.

When we first trusted Christ personally as our Savior we literally signed on to be His disciple forever. We said in our hearts, “*I want this forever commitment.*” It was a lifetime and total commitment. That commitment should still stand, and it should mean, according to Jesus Himself, *Absolute Obedience, Abounding Love, Abundant Fruitfulness, and Absolute Surrender.*

Are we willing to stand by that commitment?