

What is a Disciple?

When your church is growing, it is easy to just keep services going, while people are actually not really growing, and not being held accountable for their walk with the Lord in any real sense. It is important to learn from the pulpit what discipleship is so it can spill over into one-on-one discipleship during the week.

So, I want us to look into the Scriptures in a series to understand what we mean by that. What is a disciple? How do you make disciples? What are the costs of being a disciple? How do you know if someone is a true or false disciple?

In this message, I want us to see our Lord Jesus answer the question of what a disciple is.

When you read the New Testament, you find that the title used most often for believers is not the word ‘*Christian*’. The word ‘*Christian*’ (in the singular or plural form) appears only three times. The word ‘*believers*’ appears twice. The word ‘*brethren*’ appears numerous times as the way believers talk about themselves, and to each other – brothers and sisters.

But probably the most oft-used term to describe believers is the word ‘*disciples*.’ ‘*Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ*’ is how the Bible describes us. Indeed, the Great Commission in Matthew 28 is not ‘Go and get professions of faith.’ It is ‘Go and make disciples.’

This is how God wants us to think of ourselves – disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now that word ‘*disciples*’ has fallen on hard times. When you hear ‘*disciple*’ you think of some strange cult or religious sect; you may even think of some Eastern religion. Sometimes we think of the twelve apostles – we think they were the disciples. But our Lord made it very clear what a disciple is and what a disciple is not in this passage in Luke 14. There are three marks of a disciple seen in this passage. These three are not the entrance standard for a disciple, because then none of us would be disciples. But it is to be what defines disciples, what we grow into, what we strive after.

Luke 14:25-35 *Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, ²⁶“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. ²⁷And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. ²⁸For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it— ²⁹lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish’? ³¹Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³²Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. ³³So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.*

³⁴“Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? ³⁵It is neither fit for the land nor for the dunghill, but men throw it out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

1. A Disciple Loves Jesus Christ Supremely.

The Lord teaches us this with a striking sentence. He says, '*You cannot be my disciple unless you hate your parents, children, brothers and sisters and yourself.*'

Now what does Jesus mean by this? Is He commanding malice? Is He telling us the condition of following Him is to despise others and ourselves?

No, because this would contradict his own teaching. He told us to love our neighbours as ourselves. He told us in the Sermon on the Mount that as we would want others to treat us, so we ought to treat them. He even commanded us to love our enemies – which would make us like the Father. John tells us in **1 John 2:11** '*he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness*'.

Furthermore, Paul tells us in **Ephesians 5** that no man ever yet hated his own flesh. So if Jesus meant that we must hate ourselves, we would have a contradiction in the Bible.

So He cannot mean that we must hate others or ourselves. He must mean something else when he uses the word hate.

There is another way the Bible uses the word hate. It uses it to suggest degrees of love. We are told that, when Jacob had the two wives Leah and Rachel, it says in **Gen 29:30** that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. The next verse tells us that the Lord saw that Leah was hated. Now Jacob did not hate Leah, but his love for Rachel so eclipsed his love for Leah it was as if she was unloved by comparison. His favour for Rachel was like rejection for Leah. To a degree, this is the case with Jacob and Esau. God still regarded the people of Edom, but by comparison, His love for Jacob's seed made it like hate.

So this is not about despising anyone, it is about how much you love Christ compared to others.

Now who did the Lord list as the examples to be compared with? He listed father, mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters. Are not these the people in the world we love the most - our spouse, our parents, our own children, our brothers and sisters? And then to top it off, He adds, 'and his own life also.' Because if there is one person we consistently love more than even spouse, parents, children and siblings it is who? It is self. So the Lord has lifted the bar as high as He can as far as human loves goes. The highest human love in your life must come second to your love for Jesus Christ. Nothing and no one in your life must compete with Jesus Christ. If there is ever a conflict between one of these and Jesus Christ – Christ will come first. If parents, spouse, children, siblings or even your own nature opposes Christ, you must oppose them.

Matthew 10:37 puts it positively: *He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*

A disciple of Jesus Christ, above all else, loves Christ supremely.

What does that mean?

He loves Christ. He loves Him supremely. Jesus Christ is His chief joy. He is our goal in life. He brings us the greatest pleasure. If there is anyone we want to be with more than anyone else - it is Him. If there is anyone we want to know better – it is Him. A disciple of Jesus Christ *does not love anything or anyone more than Jesus Christ*. Not other people. Not popularity. Not pleasure. Not money. Not success. Not good looks. Not material possessions. A disciple loves Christ supremely.

Do you know why? *It is because nothing on earth deserves to be loved like God does.*

Nothing created deserves to be loved for its own sake? Everything created is to be loved for God's sake.

1Tim 4:4-5 *'For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.'*

The moment you love something for its own sake, it becomes idolatry.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the only One we love for His own sake. That's why Paul had counted his bloodline, his education, his status, and his achievements as dung. He could put it in the bin apart from knowing Christ.

It also means *we do not love Him as a means to an end*. A disciple is not using Jesus Christ to get something else. He is not using Christ to look good, or to be admired as pious, or to make life more problem-free and comfortable, or to be healthier and wealthier, to have good luck. Because then Jesus Christ is not his or her supreme love – it is that thing they are aiming at.

A disciple of Jesus Christ loves Jesus Christ for that reason – for Jesus Christ. He is the end!

Psalm 73:25 *'Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.'*

Think of this illustration from the Bible : Simon the Sorcerer did not love Jesus Christ for Jesus Christ. He wanted power, and he wanted money. And when he saw Peter heal, he showed his true colours – he offered them money for some of that power. Simon had even been baptised – but he was not a true disciple – he was in it for what he could exploit it for.

Now how does a disciple come to love Jesus Christ supremely? The answer lies in the word '*disciple*.' Disciple means, pupil, learner.

How do you come to love someone in the everyday sense? You get to love them by getting to know them, or to put it another way, by learning about them. Why does a disciple love Jesus Christ supremely? It is because he or she is forever in the posture of learning Christ, of wanting to know Him more. To know Him more than sports

figures; more than a particular boy or girl; more than the latest financials at work; more than their children's progress; more than music; more than theology for its own sake.

When you find a professing Christian without a desire to learn of Christ, you have a problem. Because a disciple wants to know – wants to learn. A disciple follows the master around, watches how he sits, stands, and prays. Because the disciple says, 'I want to be like you, I want to know you.'

Do you have an appetite for the Word of God, an appetite for Jesus Christ?

Heb 11:6 *But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*

Proverbs 2:1-5 *My son, if you receive my words, And treasure my commands within you,
² So that you incline your ear to wisdom, And apply your heart to understanding;
³ Yes, if you cry out for discernment, And lift up your voice for understanding,
⁴ If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures;
⁵ Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, And find the knowledge of God.*

How does God treat the one who is earnestly seeking, wanting to learn?
 How can we love Him if I don't even know Him?

2. A Disciple Follows Jesus Christ Single-mindedly

Now again, Jesus had used some rather intense language. He says, if you do not carry your cross, and come after me, you cannot be my disciple. This same phrase is repeated five times in the Gospels; sometimes with the phrase, 'deny himself', added in. What does this mean?

Some have taken this to mean Jesus wants us to carry a wooden beam around, and you have had people literally walking around with crosses. But that is not what Jesus meant here.

Remember, Jesus has not yet predicted his own death by crucifixion, so that is not yet in the minds of the disciples, though when they look back after the event, they would understand its great significance. What does Jesus mean?

Who would be seen carrying crosses? Criminals condemned to death. It was a further punishment; the criminal had to walk up to the place of crucifixion carrying part of the instrument which would be used to execute him. It would be like a man condemned to the gallows walking down a street full of people carrying the rope and the noose. He is going one way – and it is to his own death.

But Jesus adds the words, 'and follow me.' It is as if He is saying that this cross carrying is a prerequisite to following Him, or perhaps is part of following Him. By follow Him, He means obey me – imitate me, follow in My footsteps.

So why must I go and die if I want to follow Him or obey Him? A parallel passage will help us here.

Look in **Luke 9:23-25**: *Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. ²⁴For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. ²⁵For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?*

Notice that verse 24 begins with the word 'for'. In other words, Jesus is giving the reason for taking up your cross. And here it is – if someone tries to save his own life, he loses it, but the one willing to lose it for Christ saves it.

You see, someone carrying their cross is about to lose their life. But Jesus says, 'if you are willing to embrace death – taking up your cross for me, you will actually live.' But if you try to preserve your own life, the irony is, you will actually lose it.

He is speaking of more than the actual point of physical death. He is speaking of your whole Being, your entire life, your will. He means – if you live so as to preserve life as you want to live it, you cannot follow Me or obey Me, and you ultimately lose. If you avoid the sacrifice, the humiliation, the struggle, the burden of obedience so as to get your own way, you end up losing out. You miss those things you were seeking, and ultimately, you lose the greatest thing of all – your own soul.

But, if you embrace Me as your life, following Me as your life, your example, your authority, your power - being willing to die to your own way, to life lived for self, you will actually find life. Just as Christ's cross brought resurrection, when you will die to self, when you will turn your back on a life lived for selfish goals and ambitions and desires and pleasures, and follow Christ – you will find life, and find it more abundantly.

Jesus illustrated it this way: *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit (John 12:24).*

A disciple does not simply use Jesus as Saviour; a disciple follows Jesus as Lord. A disciple follows because he or she wants to imitate their master. We want to imbibe His Spirit and imitate His example.

Mat 10:24-25 *The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord..."*

The idea is this – a disciple comes under the authority of Jesus Christ in an absolute way. He obeys Christ single-mindedly. Being a disciple is not a negotiation. It is not a power sharing agreement. It is an all or nothing proposition. Either your self-will dies so his Lordship can live within you, or nothing.

The flesh and the Spirit are contrary to one another. The two cannot be engaged simultaneously. A car cannot be in first gear and in reverse at the same time. The flesh and the Spirit of God cannot be engaged together. You are either mortifying, killing, the flesh, and yielding to the Spirit, or you are feeding the flesh and quenching the Spirit. Your own flesh does not want to follow Him, it wants to follow itself. So the power of the cross has to be brought onto self – *'I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live..'* *'Not my will but thine be done'.*

Once again, how does a disciple know what Christ's will is? How does he or she know where Jesus is going so that she might follow? The Word of God tells us. If a disciple is a learner, it is to better follow Christ, better imitate His example.

Has the Word of God brought some death and some new life to your life this week?

3. A Disciple Holds Onto This World Slackly

One more time, the Lord uses very strong language; language almost exaggerated. He wants the force of His words to shake us. Recall what verse 35 says – ‘great multitudes followed Him.’ It is as if Jesus almost throws the gauntlet down – ‘You want to follow Me, do you?’ Is it just the buzz of the crowd? Is it just the excitement of a new thing, a fad? Is it for what you can get out of Me? This is what it means to really follow Me – to love me Supremely, to follow Me Single-mindedly, and to forsake all you have. I can picture the crowd thinning out.

Now again, does Jesus mean that in order to follow Him, you must sell or give away everything you own? It does not normally mean that, though God does call some to do that.

The word ‘forsake’ actually means bid farewell. Say goodbye to. As if to say, cut the ties between you and your material possessions. Cut the close ties between you and your money. Cut the intimate relationship you have with your bank account. Hold them loosely in your hand. If Jesus needs it, it is His. If He doesn't, it is still there.

The Lord does not begrudge you money or possessions. He means to say, cease acting like an owner of these things. Realise you are a steward, and it is God who owns both you and your goods. The Lord does not mean you should cease being wise with your finances, or He would not have given so much instruction regarding them. He means do not let these things hold on to you.

Matthew 6:19-24 *Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

How do you react when your possessions or money is threatened?

Are you willing to hold this world so loosely in your hands that you will not begrudge the Lord anything He requires of you? That you can say, ‘My all is God's. I recognise the cost is all I am, all I have, all the time.’

A man looking back is not worthy – what are you still looking back to?

A disciple must have a pilgrim-focus. I am passing through. This world is not my home. It is part of my journey, but not my home. Life is not a playground for me, it is a battleground. But my ultimate place of rest is still coming.

In ‘Pilgrim's Progress’, the Pilgrims Christian and Faithful enter the town, Vanity Fair, which is a picture of the world. It is a massive fair, with the people selling all

kinds of things. Everyone in the fair notices they are different by their clothing and their speech, and they begin to mock them. One trader comes up to them and asks them, 'What will ye buy?' They respond, 'We buy the truth.'

That's the most precious commodity, your most precious possession – truth. And as a disciple, you are willing to forsake all, for the truth's sake. You hold this world, with its goods very lightly.

Salvation is free, but following Christ is costly.

Many people come to Christ on the basis of the fact that salvation is freely offered, thinking that because the gift of eternal life is free, that the rest of life will not cost anything.

One of the reasons for so little correlation between the amount of decisions claimed every year for Christ and the amount of changed lives is that people have not looked upon this Christian life as Christ described it. It is a life of loving Christ supremely. It is also a life of following Christ single-mindedly, to the death of my flesh. And it's a life of holding this world very loosely in our hands.

So to illustrate the cost, Jesus gave two parables.

The first is the picture of a man who sets out to build a tower, without calculating the amount of materials required. He just jumps in and gets going, and then runs out of money, and people mock him for his half-finished tower. The man did not think of what it would cost, so he could not finish.

The second pictures a king about to go to war, who recognises he is vastly outnumbered. If he decides defeat is certain, he goes and asks for terms of peace before the battle. He considered the cost before he ends up soundly defeated.

The Lord is saying that, to avoid the humiliation of not finishing the Christian life and being defeated in it, make sure you consider just what it is going to cost you. It may cost you everything you have, it may not. The point is – since it may, are you willing to embrace that cost, or end up making a shipwreck of the faith?

Have you considered that a disciple is owned by his master – he is not pulled one way by money and possessions and another way by The Lord.

He does not mean that you must avoid coming to Him, He means do not approach something as momentous as following Jesus Christ lightly. He wants to weed out the superficial, light-hearted people who have no real interest in following Christ to the end. He wants to prevent people from coming, who are like that second soil in the Parable of the Sower - who have no root in themselves, and when persecution or trials come, they are offended and wither away.

Now you may say, 'But who on earth is this way? Who loves Christ supremely? Who follows Him single-mindedly? Who holds the world so loosely? Who can possibly keep this standard?'

Though a true believer will have these attitudes at conversion, they will not become perfect actions but by a process of instruction and growth. For this they need discipleship. Being a disciple requires discipleship.

Every believer in the true church is a disciple. Some are more like this portrait than others, but it is Christ's desire that every believer loves Him supremely, follows Him single-mindedly, and holds this world slackly. For that reason, we need to be discipling one another. Are you willing to yield to this process? Are you willing to be disciplined? Are you willing to possibly teach others?