

What is a Disciple?

Two thousand years ago, Jesus walked up to a handful of men and said, "Follow me."

Imagine being one of those original disciples. They were ordinary people like you and me. They had jobs, families, hobbies, and social lives. As they went about their business on the day Jesus called them, none of them would have expected his life to change so quickly and completely.

The disciples could not have fully understood what they were getting into when they responded to Jesus's call. Whatever expectations or doubts, whatever curiosity, excitement, or uncertainty they felt, nothing could have prepared them for what lay ahead. Everything about Jesus—His teaching, compassion, and wisdom; His life, death, and resurrection; His power, authority, and calling—would shape every aspect of the rest of their lives.

In only a few years, these simple men were standing before some of the most powerful rulers on earth and being accused of "turn[ing] the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). What began as simple obedience to the call of Jesus ended up changing their lives, and ultimately, the world.

What Is a Disciple?

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? As you will discover, the answer is fairly simple, but it changes your life completely.

The word *disciple* refers to a student or apprentice. Disciples in Jesus's day would follow their rabbi (which means teacher) wherever he went, learning from the rabbi's teaching and being trained to do as the rabbi did. Basically, a disciple is a follower, but only if we take the term *follower* literally. Becoming a disciple of Jesus is as simple as obeying His call to follow.

When Jesus called His first disciples, they may not have understood where Jesus would take them or the impact it would have on their lives, but they knew what it meant to follow. They took Jesus's call literally and began going everywhere He went and doing everything He did.

It's impossible to be a disciple or a follower of someone and not end up like that person. Jesus said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). That's the whole point of being a disciple of Jesus: we imitate Him, carry on His ministry, and become like Him in the process.

Yet somehow many have come to believe that a person can be a "Christian" without being like Christ. A "follower" who doesn't follow. How does that make any sense? Many people in the church have decided to take on the *name* of Christ and nothing else. This would be like Jesus walking up to those first disciples and saying, "Hey, would you guys mind identifying yourselves with Me in some way? Don't worry, I don't actually care if you do anything I do or change your lifestyle at all. I'm just looking for people who are willing to say they believe in Me and call themselves Christians." Seriously?

No one can really believe that this is all it means to be a Christian. But then why do so many people live this way? It appears that we've lost sight of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The concept of being a disciple isn't difficult to understand, but it affects everything.

Q1

Up to this point in your life, would you call yourself a follower of Jesus Christ? Why do you say that? Do you see evidence of your faith as described in Luke 6:40?

How Do I Become a Disciple?

To understand how to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, it makes most sense to start where Jesus started. While it is true that He said to the disciples, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19), the Bible records one message He proclaimed before that. In Matthew 4:17, Jesus said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Try taking this phrase literally. If someone warned you to be prepared because a king and his army were coming, what would you do? You would make sure you were ready to face him. If you weren’t prepared to fight this king, then you would do whatever it took to make peace with him.

The word *repent* means “to turn.” It has the idea of changing directions and heading the opposite way. It involves action. In this context, Jesus was telling people to prepare themselves—to change whatever needed to be changed—because God’s kingdom (the kingdom of heaven) was approaching.

So how do we prepare to face this heavenly kingdom? How do we make sure we are at peace with this coming King?

Jesus says we need to repent. This implies that we all need to turn from the way we are currently thinking and living. Romans 3:23 explains that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Every person reading this sentence has done things that are evil and offensive to this King. Romans later explains that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). Because of our sin, which is an offense to God, we should expect death. But then comes an amazing truth.

“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). The death penalty we should have faced from this King was actually paid for by someone else. The King’s Son, Jesus Christ!¹

The Scriptures then say, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). We are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. It is all about who Jesus is and what He has done. Part of our repentance is to turn from believing that there’s anything we can do to save ourselves—for everything was accomplished by Jesus Christ.

The thought that someone else has paid for our crimes is strange to most of us because it defies our natural way of thinking. And the idea that we need to trust in another person’s sacrifice on our behalf is even more foreign. But understand that while it is strange to us, it is consistent with God’s actions throughout the Scriptures.

We get a picture of this when we read the book of Exodus. In this story, Moses warned Pharaoh repeatedly about what God would do if he did not repent. It climaxed when God said He would bring death to the firstborn of every household if they did not repent. Meanwhile, He told His people that if they put the blood of a lamb over their doorposts, His angel would pass over their

homes and not kill the firstborn of that house. So even in the story of the exodus, we see that people had to trust in the blood of a lamb to save them— and this was the only way they could be saved.

Q2

Read Ephesians 2 carefully and take some time to consider the truths it presents. Do you trust in the death of Christ for your salvation? Do you ever struggle with believing you need to do something to save yourself?

The Lord of Grace

Salvation is all about the grace of God. There is absolutely nothing that you can do to save yourself or earn God's favor. Paul said, "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). No one can brag about his or her good deeds because our works cannot save us. Salvation comes through the grace of God as we place our faith in Jesus Christ. All salvation requires is faith: Do you believe that Jesus is who He says He is?

But keep in mind that while this is simple, it's not easy. Faith in Jesus Christ means believing that He is Lord (according to Rom. 10:9). Have you ever thought about what that word *Lord* means? We sometimes think of it as another name for God, but it's actually a title. It refers to a master, owner, or a person who is in a position of authority. So take a minute to think this through: Do you really believe that Jesus is your master? Do you believe that He is your owner—that you actually belong to Him?

Paul is so bold as to tell us: "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). The same Lord who by His grace set us free from sin and death now owns us. We belong to Him, and He calls us to live in obedience to His rule.

The problem is, many in the church want to "confess that Jesus is Lord," yet they don't believe that He is their master. Do you see the obvious contradiction in this? The call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is open to everyone, but we don't get to write our own job description. If Jesus is Lord, then He sets the agenda. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then your life belongs to Him. He has a plan, agenda, and calling for you. You don't get to tell Him what you'll be doing today or for the rest of your life.

Q3

Evaluate your approach to following Jesus. Would you say that you view Jesus as your Lord, Master, and Owner? Why or why not?

It All Comes Down to Love

But don't get the impression that following Jesus is all about joyless sacrifice. More than anything else, following Jesus boils down to two commands, which He said were the most important commandments in the Old Testament Law:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matt. 22:37–40)

It all comes down to love. Peter expressed it well for people like us, who didn't see Jesus on earth but follow Him nonetheless: "Though you have not seen him, *you love him*. Though you do not now see him, *you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory*" (1 Pet. 1:8).

Following Jesus is not about diligently keeping a set of rules or conjuring up the moral fortitude to lead good lives. It's about loving God and enjoying Him.

But lest we think that we can love God and live any way we want to, Jesus told us very clearly, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). The love for God in the first commandment is made practical in the love for our neighbors in the second commandment. John actually told us that if we don't love the people that we can see around us, then we don't love God, whom we can't see (1 John 4:20).

True love is all about sacrifice for the sake of the ones you love: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16). When we understand love in this light, it's not difficult to understand that love for God and obedience to Jesus Christ cannot be separated. God's love changes us from the inside out and redefines every aspect of our lives.

Q4

As you look at your life, how would you say that your love for God is shown in your actions? (If you're having trouble coming up with an answer, take some time to think through some changes you may need to make in your lifestyle.)

Count the Cost

As you work your way through this material, you will be challenged to consider what it means to be a follower of Jesus. You will think through what the Bible teaches and its implications for the way you live your life today. Everything you study will be for the purpose of applying it to your life and teaching other people to do the same. But before you set out to teach other people to be disciples of Jesus, you need to examine your heart and make sure you are a disciple.

Read the following words from Jesus slowly and carefully. Understand that Jesus is speaking these words to you. Think about what Jesus is saying and how it should affect the way you approach this material and your relationship with Him. After you have read this section, use the questions below to help you count the cost of following Jesus.

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to

build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:25–33)

Q5

If you choose to obey Jesus’s call to follow, what might it cost you? (Avoid being vague. If following Jesus would cost you specific possessions, comforts, or relationships, list them below.)

Q6

What might hold you back from following Jesus at this point? Are you willing to let go of these things if necessary?

Q7

Before you end this session, spend some time in prayer. Ask God to work in your heart and prepare you for what is ahead. You don’t need to have all the answers or know specifically how God will use you. He simply calls you to follow wherever He might lead. As you pray, be honest about your doubts, hesitations, and fears. Ask Him to give you the strength to proceed and follow Him no matter what the cost. In other words, place your faith in Him.