



Be a Disciple, not a Follower

Followers

It might have been 2,500 years ago when these words were first spoken..."Don't forget to like, share and subscribe!" *YouTube* and *Facebook* may not have existed during the times of Jesus, but social media sure did. As far back as 500 B.C. the Romans had their Rostra and the Greeks had their Pnyx. These were public forums where anybody with something to say or something to preach could take center stage. These "influencers" could present their theories or philosophies to the public in hopes of gaining "followers".

Those who liked the influencer's message would subscribe to the message by incorporating it into their own life. Some followers would share the message with others, although there was no obligation to do so. Followers had no personal relationship or commitment to the influencer. They incorporated whatever parts of the message they liked and the rest of their life could go on as usual. They were free to follow other influencers as well.

Disciples

"Go and make disciples of all nations...and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus wasn't simply an influencer, trying to convince people to be a good person and live a moral life. He wasn't looking for people to like Him or subscribe to His message. He wasn't looking for followers to incorporate the parts of His message they liked into their life. Jesus wanted disciples.

In the Jewish context, discipleship meant developing a close relationship with the teacher, who was often referred to as "master". Being a disciple involved more than learning a concept or theory from a teacher and subscribing to their message. A disciple would immerse themselves into the life of the master and shape their beliefs, character and life after the master. Disciples would conform to the master's ways, conduct themselves like the master and serve the master in whatever way they could.

Jesus needs disciples, not followers

It pretty much floored me when I came to realize the Jewish nation had neither concept nor desire for evangelization and conversion of pagans. The Jewish religion was entirely internalized. The Jews were Yahweh's people. Yahweh was their God and their God alone. The rest of the world could follow their false gods however they wished. The word "evangelize" never appears in the Old Testament and the word "disciple" only appears twice. Nowhere in the Torah does God command the Jewish nation to go into the world and teach others about Yahweh.

Conversion to Judaism occurred through assimilation, not evangelization. The foreign wives of Jewish leaders like Samson and Solomon would become converts. Jewish slaves would also sometimes convert. Converts usually had to wait a period of time to prove the sincerity of their intentions before the Jewish courts would allow them to legally convert.

Without the call to evangelize, the Jews only had to focus on their personal relationship with God. Worship, praise and obedience to God were the three pillars of the Jewish religion.

Then Jesus came into the world. Jesus brought salvation not only to the Jews but also to the whole world (1 John 2:2). The world barely knew about Yahweh and certainly didn't know anything about the Messiah and Salvation. In order to bring the good news of salvation to the world, Jesus called for disciples not followers.

The requirements of discipleship



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"If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). The phrase "come after me" implies discipleship and adoption of both the teachings and lifestyle of the master. Some Bible translations actually read "If anyone wants to be my disciple". The word "follow" is used in the context of discipleship and means to accompany or be a companion. Discipleship is nothing like following someone on *YouTube* or *Facebook*.

The first requirement of discipleship is to deny one's very self. The term implies strong rejection. In the Greco-Roman world public declarations and denials were significant, having grave implications both socially and religiously. Notably, the same word for denial is used in Matthew 26:34, where Jesus says to Peter "You will deny me three times". Consider Peter's denial of Jesus. He swore with an oath that he never knew Jesus. This is denial.

Denying oneself is the rejection of one's own will and the abandonment of any personal desires and pleasures which might interfere with discipleship. Followers have no requirement to deny anything about themselves. They simply subscribe to ideas they like and incorporate those ideas into whatever life they decide to lead.

The second requirement of discipleship is to carry the cross of discipleship. Life is full of hardship and suffering, but this is not what Jesus is talking about. Maintaining a good attitude and cheerfulness when sickness or adversity strikes is certainly a virtue, but has nothing to do with discipleship. We tend to focus a lot on Jesus' death on the cross (for good reason). But Jesus didn't just die for our sake, He "carried His cross" for our sake. Although there is no Scriptural documentation, historical evidence suggests Jesus walked about one-third of a mile. It's hard to estimate, but His weakened condition due to severe scourging and continual loss of blood could have prolonged this walk into an hour or more. Tradition has it Jesus fell three times on the road to Calvary. Each time He fell He stood up and pressed on in excruciating pain towards an even more excruciating death, rather than giving up and dying on the journey from exhaustion.

As a disciple of Jesus, we must not only be ready to die for the Master but also suffer on our life's journey for the sake of the Master. This suffering includes whatever verbal or physical punishments others would hand out because of our discipleship. It also includes forsaking any thought of denying Jesus or hiding one's faith simply to avoid chastisement, rejection, pain or inconvenience.

The third requirement of discipleship is to esteem one's relationship with God higher than all human relationships. "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 self - he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). The Greek word for "hate" in this verse is "miseo", pronounced mis-EH-o (Strong's Greek, 3404), which literally means to love less or esteem less. Our relationship with God must come first over all human relationships. Any relationship which separates us from God must be broken.

But this verse must also be kept in balance. Jesus wouldn't command His disciples to break the commandment to honor parents or break one's marriage vows. This verse has been quoted by some to justify ignoring family and family duties or even seeking divorce in order to serve God. Family and service to God are not mutually exclusive. "One must live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned them" (1 Corinthians 7:17). For a full discourse on relationships between family and God, read all of 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

Building up the Body of Christ

The disciple's deep love and commitment to the master brings a great desire to serve the master and lead others to the master. Consider the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well (John 4:5-30). Once she believed in Jesus



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as the Messiah, she immediately left her water jug, ran into town and led others back to Jesus. This was of her own desire and wasn't commanded by Jesus.

Evangelization and preaching the gospel to others is usually the first ministry that comes to mind in serving God. However, one must not perceive service to Jesus in such a narrow context as simply "saving souls". Furthermore, the very idea of any person claiming to have saved a soul is foolish and prideful. Paul writes, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth. Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

There are many ways of serving Jesus, many ministries. God calls every Christian into service and provides each Christian with a gift to enable them to fulfill the ministry He gives to them.

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-28, Paul uses the metaphor of the human body to describe the Church, stating, "For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also is Christ." This analogy illustrates the interdependence of believers, each contributing uniquely to the health and function of the whole body. Paul, in his analogy of the body, also shows how no ministry is more or less important than any other ministry. "If a foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,' it does not for this reason belong any less to the body" (verse 15) and "If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?" (verse 17).

Paul calls out a number of different ministries: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, healers, miracle workers, assistants and administrators. Even those with sickness, physical limitations or other restrictions can have a ministry to serve Jesus. It's called intercessory prayer. "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for all people" (1 Timothy 2:1) and "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people" (Ephesians 6:18). My wife's parents often referred to those with a ministry of intercessory prayer as "prayer warriors". Whatever one's gift or ministry, the Holy Spirit "produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes" (1 Corinthians 12:11).

Every gift, every ministry is given for the sole purpose of "building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12). Evangelists who "save souls" do nothing more than bring unbelievers into the Body of Christ. Teachers do nothing more than help the new believers mature in Christ. Pastors do nothing more than minister to the spiritual needs of their flock. Choir members and liturgists do nothing more than help others worship. Prayer warriors do nothing more than intercede for the needs of the Church, the world and the souls in Purgatory. In the end, God puts it all together and does His work to build up the Body of Christ, enabling it to go into the world and make disciples of the nations.

God, for the most part, doesn't give all gifts to one person and no ministry is more important than any other ministry. Pride can be stripped away from any perceived accomplishments one may have concerning the work they do for God, because they do not build up the Body of Christ by themselves. Disciples are all dependent upon God and inter-dependent upon each other for the fruits of their labor to grow.

It is for this reason every Christian must seek the Holy Spirit, discern what God is calling them to do and then do it. There is a hole in the Body of Christ for every Christian who fails to serve God as He is calling them. "As good stewards of the manifold grace of God, each of you should use whatever gift he has received to serve one another" (1 Peter 4:10-11). When God calls out "Whom shall I send?" every Christian should be ready to respond "Here I am, send me!" (Isaiah 6:2).

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The life of a disciple

Disciples take on the characteristics, ways and very life of the master. They model their own life after the master's and live it every moment of every day. Disciples represent the master and must conduct themselves accordingly. They understand the importance of every single word and action being aligned to the master. They know the world is watching at all times and the master will be judged based on their words and actions. They understand others can be led to the master or driven away from the master by the very way they conduct themselves and lead their life.

"Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). In addition to any special ministry given by God, service to Jesus comes mainly through our daily life. But good deeds is not about being a good person. To be good for the sake of being good doesn't bring glory to the Father in Heaven. The Pharisees, through ostentatious prayer and almsgiving, brought esteem only to themselves and not to God. Whatever doesn't glorify God has no merit in His eyes. To let one's light shine is to live a life so holy and pure that the world recognizes only God can bring such goodness into the world. "See how these Christians love one another." When disciples show their abundant life in Christ to the world, the world will take notice. Then, others will desire the same abundant life, turn to Christ and glorify the Father.

"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). An effective way to lead others to Christ is through daily works of mercy. Jesus didn't just convert others by words, he also converted them through love and concern for them. He healed the sick, comforted the lost and fed the multitudes. Many came to Jesus because they saw He loved them. Disciples of Jesus are like Jesus. They are always aware of the needs of others and seeking ways to tend to their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs. They bring others to Christ mainly by loving them as Jesus would love them. As Saint Francis said "All the friars should preach by their deeds."

Holiness and discipleship

Holiness, by its very nature, leads to discipleship. Discipleship grows with each step along the path of holiness. Without holiness, discipleship isn't possible. One can worship God and even serve Him without holiness. However, discipleship is more than worship and service. It is living in the mind and heart of Jesus, the Master. It is completely giving oneself over to the Master to serve Him and be His representative to the world. Without holiness, one can follow but one cannot be a disciple.

The very tenet of holiness is to be set apart for God and His purpose. This is what enables true discipleship. Holiness seeks God's purpose in life and uses the gifts God has bestowed to bring the Kingdom of God to the world and to build up the Body of Christ. Like the Samaritan woman, one is compelled to lead others back to Jesus. One cannot help but say "Here I am, Lord. Send me!"

The goal of holiness is union with Christ and the effect of holiness is transformation into the image of Christ. This has a profound effect on the conduct and daily life of the believer. One finds themselves naturally shining their light and performing works of mercy. They don't do it for self-glorification or just to be a good person. They do it solely for God and to give God all the credit and glory He deserves.