

Live a God-Pleasing Life!

Bible Study 2

Discipleship Is the Path

Prayer

Dear heavenly Father, we thank you for the privilege of being your instruments to tell others about the life-saving Gospel. Continue to grant us hearts that seek the lost. Help us to share your love and light in us with others. We pray that this study on discipleship will help us to be more faithful in our discipleship. Bless this time, and may all that we say and do give you honor and glory. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

What Is a Disciple?

What is a disciple? Jesus' last command before his ascension was, *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations"* (Matthew 28:19). How do we do that? To make disciples, we have to be disciples, don't we? To answer the question, "What is a disciple?" we may first examine how we become disciples.

In Matthew 4:19, we read Jesus' words to Peter and Andrew: *"Come, follow me."* He said, *"Come,"* and *"At once they [Peter and Andrew] left their nets and followed him"* (Matthew 4:20). In this short exchange we find the answers to both our questions. We become disciples when Jesus calls us, and we follow. Jesus chooses his disciples. He calls his disciples today just as he did at the beginning of his earthly ministry. Not one of the original twelve initiated this contact. Although Philip brought Nathanael to Jesus, it was still Jesus who issued the call. Jesus told him, *"I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you"* (John 1:48). It was Jesus who made the disciples his own and called them to a God-pleasing life of discipleship. They gave not only their first and best to their Lord, they gave their all.

There have been those who have attempted to live a life of discipleship on their own. One of these we read about in Luke 9:57-58. *"I will follow you wherever you go,"* this would-be disciple promised, but, when Jesus gave him the conditions, saying, *". . . the Son of Man has no place to lay his head,"* the applicant is not heard from again. The first condition of discipleship is that



Jesus must call us. Without his call, we are not equipped to make the sacrifices required for the calling.

Because Jesus called them, the twelve made the necessary sacrifices. They left vocations and families and stayed with Jesus who taught them by his words, showed them by his example, and poured his life into them by his constant presence with them.

"Follow me," Jesus said in Luke 9:59. It's the same command he gave to Peter and Andrew and James and John, all of whom, without a word, got up, left what they were doing, and followed him. This man, however, allowed family obligations to stand between Jesus and himself. *"First let me go and bury my father,"* he pleaded. We aren't sure if the father was already in the coffin or still had many years to live. This man failed the second condition of discipleship – that of obedience first and foremost to the Lord.

Yet another candidate (This text doesn't say whether Jesus called him or not.) agreed to follow Jesus, but on his own terms. *"I will follow you, Lord, but . . ."* (Luke 19:61), and he is rejected by Jesus who says, *"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God"* (verse 62). From this we learn that a disciple cannot set his own agenda. Unless we fulfill the third condition of discipleship and **follow** when our Master calls, we are not disciples.

This is not to say disciples never falter. Peter promised, *"Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will"* (Matthew 26:33), but we know he did. Failure to follow at times is not equal to refusal to follow. Jesus forgave and restored Peter (John 21:15-18), and the rest of his life is a model of a steward **living a God-pleasing life**.

What is a disciple? A follower! Specifically, a follower of Christ. Why did Peter and Andrew and James and John get up and leave their boats? What caused Matthew to leave his tax collector's booth and follow Christ? Did they think something great was coming? Did Jesus promise them wealth, honor, and fame? All Jesus said was, *"Follow me,"* and those Twelve he called *"got up and followed him"* (Matthew 9:9). Was it faith in Christ that led them to follow? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, wrote, ". . . the cause behind the immediate following of call by response is Jesus Christ himself. It is Jesus who calls, and because it is Jesus, [the disciples] follow at once."

Just as we cannot choose for ourselves to be disciples, we cannot choose to obey Jesus' call. It is his grace that enables us to leave what we're doing and *"[get] up and follow him."* Grace precedes discipleship. The following of Christ is no more a human achievement than is the procuring of our salvation. We are able to obey Christ's command, *"Follow me,"* by the same grace which has given us salvation. When we, like the first disciples, obey that command, get up, and leave everything, we find we have gained everything!

Questions for Discussion

1. What is a disciple?
2. How do you become a disciple?
3. How did Jesus choose his first disciples (Luke 6:12-16)?
4. Why did they follow Christ?

5. What are three conditions of discipleship?
6. What is the practical application of Romans 12:1?
7. Has Jesus chosen you (John 15:16)?
8. Are you obedient? What hinders your obedience?
9. Is Acts 1:8 being fulfilled in your life?
10. Read Matthew 19:28-30. How can you gain by losing?

The Nature of Discipleship

Jesus did not mean for the life of discipleship to be onerous for his followers. In Matthew 11, Jesus is again issuing his call: "Come to me," he beckons. Whom is he calling? "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened." He did not say, "Come to me, all you who are strong and able to carry the burdens of the world." If you are self-sufficient and self-confident, you will find it difficult to hear Jesus' call.



Why did the crowds marvel at the disciples? "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished . . ." The only explanation for the disciples' behavior and attitude was ". . . that these men had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). Even the well-educated Apostle Paul, who thought he was self-sufficient, couldn't escape Jesus' call. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9:4, 6). Paul's encounter with Jesus shattered his confidence and conviction. Educated and powerful as he was, he discovered he was weak and that all his earthly treasures were rubbish compared to knowing Christ (Philippians 3:8).

Why is Jesus calling? "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." He's calling us to be his disciples that he might give us rest! He asks us to follow him in obedience, leaving all behind, in order that he might give us rest. Paul and Silas, in prison for speaking out for their faith, were singing and praising God (Acts 16:25). Their future was uncertain, but their rest was assured because it came from God, not as a result of their circumstances.

He goes on. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-29). No, the life of discipleship is not onerous for those following Jesus. The one who willingly wears Jesus' yoke, the one who loves God by carrying out his commands, finds that "His commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

The disciple follows where he/she is led. Their path may lead to their death, as it did for each of the twelve. Regardless, it is a path of joy. The prophet Agabus prophesied that the Apostle Paul would be turned over to the Gentiles by the Jews. Paul's companions urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem, but "Paul answered, 'Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not

only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus' " (Acts 21:1-14). Willingly, Paul went to what he knew would be his final destination in this world. Perhaps it was Paul who wrote those words in Hebrews 12:2 which exhort us to model our discipleship after the example of Jesus, *"the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross . . ."* Jesus doesn't ask us to do anything he hasn't already done for us. By taking his yoke on ourselves, we will find joy on the path on which he leads us.

The forgiveness of our sins cost Jesus his life, and it costs disciples the same. If we want to be stewards **living a God-pleasing life**, our lives are no longer our own; we live them in complete obedience to Christ. Far from begrudgingly, we joyfully say with Paul, *"I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"* (Galatians 2:20).

Questions for Discussion

11. What does Jesus promise his followers?
12. We know we are saved by grace through faith. How does that knowledge affect your life of discipleship?
13. What was the secret of Paul's strength? (See 2 Corinthians 12:9-10)
14. What attitudes are necessary in your life of discipleship?

Terms of Discipleship

"He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected . . . "(Mark 8:31)."God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Jesus came into the world to give his life in order that he might save sinners. That salvation could not be accomplished without his suffering and rejection which was prophesied by the prophet Isaiah some 700 years before Christ's birth (Isaiah 53). Should we, as his servants, expect anything other than to suffer as our Master suffered? Jesus said, *"A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his Master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his Master"* (Matthew 10:24-25). Jesus never hid from his followers what the life of discipleship would be like. He told us, *"In this world you will have trouble"* (John 16:33).

Peter, for one, didn't like hearing this. The Bible says he actually "rebuked" Jesus (Mark 8:21). "Of all the nerve!" we think, although we have probably done the same. How we plan for Easter Sunday – preparing the music in church, planning the Sunday menu, laying out the new clothes – while we race through Holy Week, skipping those depressing Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. We, too, rebuke our Lord. Tell us about the Resurrection; we don't want to hear about the beatings and mocking and the crown of thorns. Let's talk about the angels at the tomb and the dazzling white robe. Give us the glory; forget the cross.

"But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said" (Mark 8:33). Then Jesus began to explain to them what the life of discipleship was all about. We, too, are recipients of that message. First he gives us a choice: *"If anyone*

would come after me . . ." (verse 34). We are free to reject this offer. Many did (John 6:66), and many still do. Some, however, do not turn away. The first term of discipleship is met, and Jesus lays down the second: ". . . he must deny himself" (verse 34). Stewards **living a God-pleasing life** say, along with John the Baptist, *"He must become greater; I must become less"* (John 3:30). The disciple who denies himself is unaware of himself and knows Christ only. He follows Jesus on a road which would be too hard for him to travel if he knew where it would take him or what he would have to endure on his journey. He keeps his eyes on Christ, without thinking of self, and *"consider[s] it pure joy . . ."* (James 1:2) to face the trials and testings of his faith.

There's more. Jesus says, ". . . and take up his cross . . ." (verse 34). Christ knew the road that lay ahead of him, and he chose it willingly, joyfully enduring the cross. It is possible for us as disciples to take up our crosses only if we are oblivious to ourselves. If we are looking at ourselves, our crosses become unbearably heavy. By teaching us first that we must deny ourselves, Jesus has prepared us to carry our crosses. Looking to Jesus, we are unaware of the burdens of our crosses; we view our lives of discipleship as a joy. The suffering we endure is only the fruit of our adherence to Christ. We understand how the apostles could rejoice ". . . because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41). Just as we did not choose to be disciples, we do not choose the crosses we will carry. Each of us has a different share. For some, the cross is martyrdom.

This exhortation concludes with Jesus' command, ". . . and follow me" (verse 34). All of us are called to die to ourselves and to our attachment to the things of the world. "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die," wrote Bonhoeffer. Christ, speaking about the life of discipleship, said, *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple"* (Luke 14:26-27). This is a drastic command, a command we cannot carry out, but that Christ has already done for us!



We are to die to sin. St. Paul writes, *"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free"* (Romans 8:1-2). As disciples, we carry our crosses, but not the burdens of our sins. From this burden Christ has set us free. We are to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), but Isaiah writes, *"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows . . . and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all"* (Isaiah 53:4-6). We can carry these burdens because it is Christ himself who bears us up. We are called to forgive one another, ". . . just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). Through Christ's death and resurrection, our sins are forgiven, and we are free to forgive one another. All that Christ requires of us as his followers he has first done for us and thus enables us to do.

Questions for Discussion

15. Explain in your own words the meaning of Matthew 10:24-25.
16. What are the terms of discipleship according to Jesus?

17. How does suffering enhance your discipleship (1 Peter 1:3-9)?

18. How is suffering both the seed and the fruit in the life of a disciple?

Concluding Thoughts

As stewards **living a God-pleasing life**, we have been entrusted with the Gospel, and, through our discipleship, we prove our faithfulness to that trust. We first become disciples; then we begin to go about the work of discipling (1 Corinthians 4:2). Jesus continues to call us to lives of discipleship. He does not appear bodily at our places of work or at the doors of our homes as he did with the first disciples. Therefore, we must listen for him where we can find him: in his Holy Word and through the Sacraments. The disciples saw him and believed. They heard his word of invitation and followed. We, too, see and hear him for we receive his word of invitation and his strength and forgiveness through his Word and Sacraments.

Only through faith can we be stewards **living God-pleasing lives**. *"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him"* (Hebrews 11:6). If we shift our focus to ourselves and our good deeds, we are no longer following Christ, but making ourselves known.

On the other hand, we have at times so emphasized grace that we have cheapened it by not following Christ. This lack of discipleship leads to ungodly living and, eventually, the downfall of the church as we are weakened by self-deception and lose the will and the power to live the life of discipleship. Speaking to believers, Jesus said, *"You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world"* (Matthew 5:13-14). He didn't say we are "to be" salt and light, but that we "are" salt and light. It is the nature of salt to flavor, and the nature of light to illumine. If they don't, something unnatural has occurred to keep them from being what they are. Disciples must be what they are, or they are not disciples. Jesus concluded his discourse on salt and light by giving us the reason for **living God-pleasing lives**: *"Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven"* (Matthew 5:16). We are called to be God's lights, and, in doing his will, people will see the good deeds that we do through faith. Through our good deeds, others could be encouraged to praise and follow our Lord.

Prayer

Dear Lord, we thank you for choosing and calling us to be your disciples. Help us to be faithful in our witnessing and proclaiming your love to all people. Grant us passion to be the ambassadors for Jesus that you want us to be. Help us to be faithful stewards of the Gospel. In your precious name we pray. Amen.

