

# What is a Disciple?

**B**ASIC TO ANY DISCUSSION of discipleship or discipline is a definition of the term “disciple. When they hear the word, most people probably think of the twelve disciples—Peter, James, John and the other apostles. But the term is broader, encompassing more than just the original followers of Jesus.

A *disciple* is a follower, a learner, anyone who believes and practices the doctrines of his teacher. The New Testament mentions several kinds of disciples. There are:

- followers of John the Baptist (Mk 2:18)
- followers of the Pharisees (John 3:25)
- followers of Moses (John 9:28)
- followers of Jesus (Mk 2:18)

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, that is, if you are a Christian, then you are a disciple.

*Discipline* implies instruction and correction, the training that improves, molds, strengthens, and perfects character. It is the moral education obtained by the enforcement of obedience through supervision and control. Discipline is associated with correction, chastening, and instruction. It is often illustrated by the relationship of a father to his son: “As a man chastens his son, so the LORD chastens you (Deut 8:5). “My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction: For whom the LORD loveth he correcteth; ... a father the son in whom he delighteth. (Prov 3:11–12). Discipline is a sign of love. “As many as I love I rebuke and chasten (Rev 3:19).<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> V. R. Edman, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 320.

A *discipline* refers to a practice or habit that strengthens or sets apart a disciple. Just as practicing scales on an instrument helps the musician develop his talent, so participation in various practices helps the believer develop and grow in his Christian life. The disciplines that we'll study in this series include Bible reading, prayer, devotions, worship, evangelism, service, stewardship, and learning.

*Discipleship* suggests the active pursuit of those things that makes one a good disciple. Discipleship is following your teacher, obeying what he says, seeking to be more like him, engaging in those disciplines that will result in growth and education.

## The Value of Spiritual Discipline

You may recall that our theme text for this series is 1 Timothy 4:7-8.

But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.

There is a purpose or goal for discipleship. Spiritual disciplines are the God-given means we are to use in the pursuit of godliness. Godly, spiritually mature people are disciplined people. In fact, the only means of attaining spiritual maturity and strength is through discipleship. It's a necessary part of growth. All the great heroes of church history were disciplined people—Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Bunyan, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, George Muller—all of them spent much time and effort pursuing the disciplines necessary for spiritual maturity.

There are several ways that God has ordained to produce spiritual growth. People and circumstances often mold and shape us. These are external factors that we often have no control over. But it's totally up to us whether, and to what extent, we choose to be involved in disciplines. Spiritual exercise is like physical exercise—we know that it's good for us, and we desire the end results, but we often neglect it.



“The job of the football coach is to make men do what they don't want to do in order to achieve what they've always wanted to be .

Tom Landry

Spiritual growth is a cooperative effort between God and the believer. We do not achieve it by pure self-will, determination, and commitment to the disciplines. Neither do we passively sit back and wait for it to arrive with no effort from us. Rather, as we pursue godliness through the disciplines, God causes our spiritual growth. This is why God can command us to “grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). If we do our part, God will do His part.

Note the words of Christ in Matthew 11:28-30

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

This passage tells that to be a disciple of Jesus means to learn from and follow Him. Learning and following involve discipline—he refers to it as a yoke. Those who refuse such discipline are not true followers.

## **The Danger of Neglecting Spiritual Discipline**

What is the state of those believers who refuse to engage in spiritual discipline? Such people have little fruit, little strength, and little to offer their Lord. Note the following from William Barclay:

Nothing was ever achieved without discipline; and many an athlete and many a man has been ruined because he abandoned discipline and let himself grow slack. Coleridge is the supreme tragedy of indiscipline. Never did so great a mind produce so little. He left Cambridge University to join the army; but he left the army because . . . he could not rub down a horse; he returned to Oxford and left without a de-



gree. He began a paper called *The Watchman* which lived for ten [editions] and then died. It has been said of him: “He lost himself in visions of work to be done, that always remained to be done. Coleridge had every poetic gift but one the gift of sustained and concentrated effort. . . . No one ever reached any eminence, and no one having reached it ever maintained it, without discipline.”<sup>2</sup>

The same could be said of believers. All Christians have at least one spiritual gift (1 Cor 12:4-7). But one must develop such gifts through discipline in order to become more fruitful. It’s a great shame when a believer, who has great potential for service, neglects discipline, thereby squandering his abilities and producing little or nothing of value.

## The Freedom Gained Through Spiritual Discipline

It may seem contradictory to suggest that one gains freedom through discipline, but it’s true. It would seem that the requirements and limitations discipline imposes would be restrictive and binding, not freeing. But it is only through discipline that believers are free to fully develop their relationship with God. For example, only those who spend hours practicing music have the ability (freedom) to become professional musicians. Only those athletes who spend hours conditioning themselves are free to excel in their sports. Almost anything worth doing well requires commitment, restriction, and effort. Those who refuse discipline will never reach the heights or achievements of those who accept discipline.

How does spiritual discipline “free” the believer? Only those who have spent time memorizing Scripture can recall the text when called upon to do so. Only those who have shown themselves to be faithful in little things will be asked to assume more significant tasks. Only those who have developed spiritual insight and knowledge through intense study have

2 Quoted in Whitney, p. 22.



the answers to the difficult questions. Only those who have developed an unfailing trust in God through great trials have words of wisdom for those experiencing similar trials. So it is through the fires of discipline that one is freed to fully express their faith.

## **Misunderstanding discipleship**

There are those who draw a distinction between regular believers and disciples. They suggest that at the point of salvation, one accepts Christ as Savior, but one need not recognize Him as Lord. No submission, commitment or loyalty is necessary. They hope that at a later point in time, one hopefully will submit himself to Christ as Lord. Thus, in their opinion, one may be a believer but not a disciple.

Such a distinction between regular believers and disciples simply does not hold up under biblical scrutiny. All Christians are followers of Christ, and are thus legitimately called disciples. Disciples are not “super” believers. Jesus said, “Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me (Mk 8:34). The requirements for discipleship hold true for anyone who follows Christ. If you are a follower of Christ, then you are a disciple, and the requirements of a disciple are binding for you.

There is a further misunderstanding about discipline. Some would say that those who advocate a disciplined life are really just legalists, insisting that others adopt their own subjective standards. But discipline and legalism are worlds apart. Legalism is self-centered effort to gain merit with God through self-denial or sacrifice. Discipline is engaging in spiritual practices with the goal of pleasing God and growing in the faith. The two are not the same.

## **The imperative of discipleship**

If you closely examine the life of Jesus, you will find that he spent a great deal of time preparing the



twelve disciples to carry on His work after He left. Of the twelve, Peter, James and John seemed to compose an inner circle of those closest to Jesus. Jesus parting words to the disciples were, "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you... I am with you..(Mt 28:18-20). Paul taught the same thing: "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also (2 Tim 2:2). It is not enough to preach the gospel to all nations. Those who believe must also be taught to obey all that Christ has taught. This is the essence of discipleship.

God calls upon us not only to be disciples, but also to make disciples. Each one of us is uniquely connected to a network of lost people who constitute our calling. We can become what the twelve became — workers sent by God to those who are lost. If the gospel is truly to penetrate a place, it will be through the people Jesus calls salt, light, and good seed — people for whom indifference has been replaced by love and concern.<sup>3</sup> Those who become believers should then be channeled into a discipleship program to encourage their growth. The cycle continues as new believers learn, grow, and eventually reach others for Christ.

## Conclusion

"Personal discipline is the indispensable key for accomplishing anything in this life. . . . We will never get anywhere in life without discipline, be it in the arts, business, athletics or academics. This is doubly so in spiritual matters. . . . Spiritual discipline is everything."<sup>4</sup>

A disciple is simply a follower or a learner. Followers of Christ are disciples. Spiritual disciplines are beneficial in that they are the God-given means by which we pursue godliness. Those who neglect spiritual discipline have little fruit, little strength, and little to offer their Lord. It is only through discipline that believers are free to fully develop their relationship with God.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Petersen, "A Disciple's Vision" *Discipleship Journal* July/Aug 97

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, p. 13, 15.



God calls all believers not only to personal discipleship, but also to make and mature more disciples.

Engaging in spiritual disciplines is much like practicing an instrument. At times it may seem like drudgery, and you may not really feel like doing it. But if you persevere, you will be glad you did. The payoff is worth the effort.

## **For Further Discussion**

1. What would cause one to believe that there is a difference between regular believers and disciples?

Easy-believism. NT discipleship is costly. Those who preach EB assert that there is no cost involved in salvation. Thus, in order to have a cost-free salvation, one must posit a difference between regular believers and disciples.

2. Explain the idea of gaining freedom through discipline.

Training yields the ability to perform at a high level. Discipline leads to a greater experience of the Christian life.

3. What are some reasons believers don't participate in the disciplines more fully?

Various reasons – too busy, lazy, ignorant, not emphasized at church, disobedience, etc.

4. Describe the disciple-making process.

Preach the gospel, those who get saved are channeled into discipleship opportunities (classes, service), then sent out to reach others.

