

Characteristics of a Disciple

WE'VE already determined that a disciple is a follower or learner, and that all Christians are disciples of Christ. Disciples are not a separate class of “super believers” — all Christians are called upon to fulfill the requirements of a disciple. We've also discovered that believers are not only called upon to be disciples, but they are also responsible to make disciples.

So what does a disciple look like? In other words, what are the characteristics that distinguish a disciple? We'll find out by examining what Jesus said to and about his disciples.

Disciples follow Christ (Matt 10:24; Mark 1:16-20)

The primary definition of a disciple is a follower. The twelve disciples were the primary audience in Matthew 10, but the application of Jesus' words broadens out to all followers of Christ. Jesus uses words like “whoever” and “he that” which suggest he had all future disciples in mind.

Following Christ means learning from Him, adopting His values and obeying His commands.



Disciples are like Christ

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. (Matt 10:24-25)

He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked. (1 John 2:6)

The goal of the Christian life is to conform to the likeness of Christ. A true disciple is content to be like his teacher. This is what Paul meant when he said that he wanted to “know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death” (Phil 3:10).

A disciple doesn't try to escape what his Lord experienced. It is sufficient for him to be treated as He was. Christ's enemies treated Him in the most cruel and brutal ways. We should not be surprised if we receive the same kind of treatment.

Disciples are not afraid to confess Christ publicly

Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven. (Matt 10:32-33)

Note the word “therefore” in the above verse. Jesus had just given several reasons why his disciples should not fear to confess Him publicly:

1. Time would bring all things to light, when the wickedness of men would be discovered, their evil designs seen through. The innocence and integrity of Jesus and his disciples would be made manifest.¹ God is just. He will reward the righteous and punish the wicked.



2. God is more to be feared more than evil men. While men may kill the body, they are unable to kill the soul. God can destroy both soul and body in hell.

3. Nothing can happen to a disciple without God's approval. Even seemingly minor details of life are under God's sovereign control. One should not fear the consequences of confessing Christ, because anything that happens as a result is under God's control.

The word "confess" means "to acknowledge, "to claim, or "to agree. Those who confess Christ acknowledge Him or claim Him to be their Savior. Many believers today are Christians "in camouflage. That is, there is nothing different about them, nothing that marks them out as followers of Christ. Believers may seek to blend in with the world to avoid the problems involved with confessing Christ publicly. In other words, they are more afraid of what people think than they are of what God thinks. Personal popularity is more important to them than loyalty to Jesus is. But one of the marks of a disciple is the courage to publicly take a stand for Christ. Disciples boldly proclaim, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ" (Rom 1:16).

Disciples count the cost

Unlike many modern evangelists, Jesus didn't hide the cost of following Him. He didn't present all the benefits without first discussing the costs involved. We don't do anyone a favor by trying to get him or her to become a disciple of Christ without explaining what belonging to Him will cost. Many false believers come into the church because they are never presented with the costs of discipleship.² Others show some initial interest in being saved, and may even profess to be saved, but soon lose interest when they find out the costs of discipleship.



² John MacArthur, *A Practical Guide to Disciples*, p. 75.

Other texts on the costs of discipleship:

Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. . . . Many, therefore, of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? . . . From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. (John 6:53-66)

Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:33)

Then Peter said, "Lo, we have left all, and followed thee. (Luke 18:28)

But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. (Philippians 3:7)

It's the height of dishonesty to fail to mention what Christ requires from disciples when we are presenting the gospel to someone. We must inform our audience of both the benefits *and* the costs of being saved.

Disciples leave all

As we've already seen, Jesus requires a major, life-changing commitment from His disciples. Peter and the other disciples knew what they were doing when they decided to follow Christ—they left all. At times, they wondered if it was worth it. In some cases, following Christ may mean leaving home, career, and even family. Jesus asserts that a disciple must release all claims over his own former life. Fortunately, those who lose their lives find true life. That is, it's only when we deny ourselves that we are able to enjoy the kind of abundant life that Christ promised.

Commitment is one aspect of the Christian life that is not popular today. People want to go to heaven and avoid hell, but they are not interested in self-denial or sacrifice for the cause of Christ. Unfortunately, evangelists often advertise salvation as an easy, no obligation, no cost decision. Thus, people think they



can be Christians with no strings attached. But this is not the gospel Jesus or the apostles preached.

Disciples practice self-denial

Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. (Mark 8:34-35)

Jesus repeatedly told his disciples to “take up the cross. Believers often think of “crosses to bear” as physical problems, annoying family members, or anything else that causes pain or discomfort. But when Jesus talks about a cross to bear, He is not talking about putting up with annoying people or pain. He’s talking about death. Over 2,000 Christians were crucified in Galilee by the Roman authorities. People were hanging on crosses all over the Roman Empire. Jesus was saying that following Him may result in one’s physical death. In the early church, one had to be willing to literally give up his life to be a follower of Christ.

Today, in many parts of the world, disciples of Christ may suffer the same fate as those early believers. But those of us who enjoy life under democratic governments will probably not be physically persecuted for confessing Christ. Nevertheless, a disciple “takes up the cross” when he puts his own desires and plans to death and begins to live for Christ. This is the way of the cross for most of us—deny your self and live for Christ.

[Believers] should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him who died for them, and rose again. (2 Cor 5:15)

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. (Romans 12:1)



Who Can't be a Disciple? Luke 14:26-33

Discipleship is clearly not for everyone. In the story of the rich young ruler (Luke 18:22-23), the man was unwilling to “forsake all” to follow Jesus. Earthly riches were more important to him than eternal life. Jesus made several statements that put limits on discipleship.

Those who put other relationships ahead of their relationship with Christ

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)

Christ demands the highest priority in your life. No other relationship can come between you and God. In fact, if it comes down to choosing between pleasing your family or obeying God, Jesus calls upon you to obey God. A true disciple will value his relationship with God above all other relationships.

It's common in many parts of the world for those who confess Christ to be totally cut off from their families as a result. This is what Jesus meant when he said,

“For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. (Matt 10:35-36)

Those who refuse to bear the cross

And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:27)

Those who refuse to forsake all for Christ

So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:33)

The twelve disciples had forsaken all to follow Jesus (Luke 5:11, 28; 18:28). Jesus calls upon all disciples to do the same thing. Some are unwilling to be disci-



ples for this very reason. The costs of following Christ are extremely high. He requires everything. Every aspect of life—possessions, plans, relationships, family—must be submitted to the Lordship of Christ. If you're not willing to “forsake all,” then you're not ready to be a disciple.

Review

What is a disciple? A disciple is one who:

- Follows Christ
- Strives to be like Christ
- Confesses Christ publicly and fearlessly
- Leaves all to follow Christ
- Practices self-denial

You can be a disciple of Christ only if you are willing to make your relationship with God your top priority, take up your cross, and forsake all to follow Christ.

Conclusion

Discipleship isn't for sissies or slackers. Christ calls us to sacrifice our lives for Him. Many people are not willing to embrace such requirements. At various times in His ministry, Jesus had thousands of “disciples.” Yet at the end of His life, only a handful were loyal to Him. What kind of a disciple are you?

For Further Discussion:

1. Is discipleship only for committed, mature believers, or is it required of all followers of Christ?

Discipleship is for all. All believers are to strive to fulfill the characteristics of being disciples. There's only one category of believer—disciple of Christ.

2. Is discipleship a lengthy process or do you achieve the characteristics of a disciple at the point of salvation?



Both. You become a disciple at the point of salvation, but not a mature one. As you strive to fulfill the requirements of a disciple, you grow in spiritual maturity. So discipleship is both a standing and a process.

3. Why doesn't the idea of discipleship fit very well with modern man?

Because Jesus requires things that are *anathema* to the modern mindset—commitment, self-denial, discomfort, sacrifice, putting someone else first.

4. Can one “confess Christ” and still not be saved?

Yes. Most cultists confess Christ, but they are not saved. Others confess Christ, yet in their works they deny Him (Titus 1:15–16).

