

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

Discipleship Message #3

In the last two weeks we've taken time to define both our *purpose* and our *mission*.

- What we've seen applies to us as individuals and to us as a church.
- Purpose: God has created us and placed us here to glorify Himself and so that we may enjoy Him forever.
- Mission: (John 17.4) In order to fulfill our purpose, we need to finish the work God gave us to do.
 - ✓ This refers to our mission, which is to be and make disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - ✓ This work (our mission) is what we commonly refer to as “discipleship.”

And this is why we started Harvest Baptist Church: To fulfill the mission of being and making disciples.

- That means we are committed to both evangelism (salvation) and edification (sanctification).
 - ✓ Through evangelism a disciple is made, in the sense of “created” (we are saved).
 - ✓ Through edification a disciple is made, in the sense of “molded” (we are sanctified).
- Together, evangelism and edification form what we refer to as “discipleship”: Luke 6.40.
 - ✓ Discipleship (evangelism and edification) is the work God expects us to do on this earth in order to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever.

And this is why, in the first sermon series, we are studying what the Bible says about discipleship.

- We need to know *what* discipleship is, *who* is responsible for it, *how* we should do it, *where* it happens, *when* it happens (because some say it's not for our dispensation), and *why* we intend to pour so much effort and resources into it.
- If we don't understand discipleship, we don't understand our mission and we will never fulfill our purpose here on earth.

So, what does the Bible say about discipleship? Where do we start in order to understand discipleship?

- If discipleship refers to being and making *disciples*, then a good place to start would be with the term “disciple.” What is a disciple?
- What does the Bible say about disciples? That's our question that we intend to answer in this message.

The question (what is a disciple?) can be answered easily enough: A disciple is a Christian, a saved believer.

- That answer, though, needs some further explanation...

I. How do we define what a disciple is?

- We need to *observe* biblical passages in their proper *context*. That means we need to take a couple things into account when we approach the Bible to see how the Scripture defines a disciple.

A. The Transition: Some terms and concepts of discipleship “evolve” throughout Jesus' ministry

1. When Jesus began His earthly ministry, He started with a known concept of discipleship (John the Baptist had disciples, as did the Pharisees; even the Romans had various forms of discipleship).
2. Jesus took a known concept and molded it over His three-year ministry, forming it into what He wanted to remain. For example:
 - a) At the beginning of the Gospels we can see that the word “disciple” refers to even the most casual follower of Jesus (many of whom left when the teaching made them uncomfortable, like we see happen in John 6).
 - b) Yet when we get to the Acts, we see that the term “disciple” has solidified and is used almost exclusively to refer to Christians (Acts 4.32 cf. 6.2; the multitude of *believers* are *disciples*).

3. Why is this important? It helps us know where to go for our definitions: The Book of Acts!
 - a) A disciple in the Book of Acts will look very different than a disciple in the Gospels (and we will cause a *lot* confusion if we read back into the Gospels what we see in Acts).
 - b) The Book of Acts (after the transition; after disciples had “evolved”) will give us a much more clear picture of Jesus' form of discipleship than will the Gospels (during the transition).
 - (1) In Acts we see the “finished product” of discipleship as Jesus wanted it.
 - (2) In the Gospels we have to be careful because Jesus' discipleship was still a “work in progress” at that time. He was still molding and forming the concept into what we see later become solidified after His ascension in the Book of Acts.

B. The Dispensations: Acts 2 marks a major dispensational shift in Scripture.

1. Before Acts 2, Christ was physically present for His disciples to follow (and yet even then only a few select individuals were allowed to follow Him around physically).
2. After Acts 2, Christ is spiritually present in all of His disciples and we follow Him in a figurative sense, mostly through the Scripture (we don't follow Him physically anymore).
3. A disciple, therefore, will look *very* different before Acts 2 when compared to the disciples after Acts 2. And, again, our most clear picture of a disciple will be found in Acts, not in the Gospels.

C. The Twelve: Using the Twelve as a model for discipleship today is, at best, problematic.

1. This should be mentioned simply because the vast majority of materials available on discipleship today are based on the “Great Commission” and the ministry of Jesus to the Twelve.
2. The Twelve followed Jesus around physically for three years.
 - That was not the norm for most disciples then, nor is it the norm for any disciple after Acts 2.
3. The model of the Twelve is more an example of *leadership development* than it is a pattern of normal discipleship in the Church Age.
 - a) The Twelve and their training under Jesus do not give a good example of discipleship.
 - b) They and their training are better models of how to develop leaders who will replace their leader in order to carry on his ministry in his absence.
4. There is also a very Jewish nature to the ministry of the Twelve, even in the Commission given them after the resurrection (and we'll speak more about that in another message).

D. The Conclusion: As we look for a definition of *disciple* in Scripture, we need to do two things:

1. Start with *observation*: What does the Bible *say*? (We need to work hard at not leaping ahead to interpretations based on our presuppositions.)
2. Establish the *context* of every passage: Where does the passage fit into the progressive revelation of Scripture and in the transition that was taking place at that time in history.
3. With these things in mind, we can now take a look at what the Bible says about disciples. If discipleship is our mission, we need to know first what a disciple is and what one looks like?

II. A disciple, in the Church Age, is a Christian.

A. A disciple is a Christian and a Christian is a disciple; the terms are synonymous in Acts.

1. Disciples are not some special class of really, really committed Christians.
2. (Acts 11.26) The members of the church at Antioch were disciples they were called Christians.
3. A disciple is a follower (kind of a “lifestyle apprentice”) and those who follow Christ—His disciples—are “Christians” (kind of like calling someone a “Buddhist” for following Buddha).
4. (Acts 14.21-22) When the Gospel is preached, people are converted to faith in Christ. These converts are called “disciples” (all of them, not just the select few who are really committed).

B. A disciple is a sinner who has repented, believed, and been regenerated by God.

1. Each of these three elements is necessary in our age for someone to be a disciple, but that's how a sinner becomes a disciple (a Christian).
2. First, **repentance** is necessary for salvation—for becoming a disciple.
 - a) By definition a disciple is one who follows a master in order to be like him.
 - b) A sinner that does not repent is still following his old master of sin and self, not the Lord. Therefore, if the sinner does not repent, he is not the Lord's disciple (he's not a Christian).
3. Second, **faith** is also necessary for salvation—for becoming a disciple.
 - a) Without faith in Christ a person is not a disciple of the Lord because (obviously) he is not following the Lord but rather something or someone else.
 - b) If the sinner is not trusting in and following the Savior, he's trusting in and follow something or someone else.
4. Third, in our age, a disciple is made (created) by the **regeneration** of the Holy Spirit.
 - With both repentance and faith (turning from sin to the Lord), God will regenerate a person by His Spirit. That sinner becomes a disciple (a follower of Jesus Christ), a “Christian.”
5. If we don't have a proper and biblical concept of *disciple*, we won't have a proper and biblical concept of what a Christian is (which is one reason why our churches a full of believers who are not following Jesus Christ: they're not saved!).
 - a) A disciple is a Christian; a Christian is a disciple. If you're not a disciple, don't call yourself a Christian because the Bible does not (not in the Church Age).
 - b) The terms *disciple* and *Christian* are used synonymously in Acts.
 - (1) In order to be saved (to be a Christian), one must be a follower of Jesus Christ, a disciple—he must have turned from sin to Christ.
 - (2) Every Christian is a disciple (not just some really committed, spiritual elite).
6. Discipleship, therefore, is much more than a program, a set of lessons, or a specific ministry.
 - a) Discipleship is the “normal Christian life” because it refers to the process that disciples (all born-again Christians) go through in order to grow in Christ-likeness: Luke 6.49 cf. Rom 8.29.
 - b) Everything we do as individuals, or as a church, to grow in Christ is “discipleship.” Discipleship is just the life of a Christian—it's the life of a disciple following his Lord.

III. What does a disciple look like?

A. A disciple is someone who is “following” Jesus (like an apprentice “follows/imitates” a master).

1. (Rom 8.29) A disciple is someone who looks more and more like Christ as time goes by (which is God's plan for all those who are saved).
2. (Luke 6.40) A disciple is someone who is becoming like his Master. As we “follow” Christ (as disciples) we become more and more like Christ (Christians). A disciple is a Christian.
 - a) It begins with evangelism: Salvation (repentance, faith, and regeneration).
 - b) It continues with edification: Sanctification (holiness, godliness, Christ-likeness).
3. So what does that look like? Jesus pointed out three general qualities that would distinguish His disciples. A disciple... A Christian... a person following Christ... looks like this...

B. First Quality of a Disciple: (John 8.31) He will continue (abide) in Jesus' Word.

1. There will be a consistency in his walk, in his lifestyle, in how he lives and conducts himself. He will not set his hand to the plow and then turn back to the world; he will abide in Christ.
2. (John 15.4-9) A true disciple (Christian) will abide in Christ: he will hear His words, submit to His words, and obey His words (that's how you "abide/continue" in the Word).
 - a) Obviously we grow in holiness, which means we'll fail to abide—we'll fall into sin.
 - b) But there will always be an element of consistency (continuing/abiding) in a true disciple.
3. Those who refuse to abide in Christ and in His Word are those who give indications that they may not really be His disciples (they may not be saved)... because Christ said His disciples would abide.

C. Second Quality of a Disciple: (John 13.34-35) Jesus' disciples will exhibit love for one another.

1. The same love Christ showed to His disciples, His disciples will in turn show to others (because they are "following" Jesus—imitating Him as an "apprentice" would a master—to be like Him).
2. Jesus' love was not (and is not) some romantic, squishy, huggy kind of love. His was (and is) a love that sought the best for all: It sought God's glory and sinners' welfare.
 - a) Jesus loved by seeking and saving the lost—He lived and died to save us.
 - b) Jesus loved by making disciples and helping them grow into what God wanted them to be.
3. Jesus' disciples will love one another in that same way:
 - a) We will love lost sinners by evangelizing them—seeking them out to lead them to salvation.
 - b) We will love saved sinners by edifying them—teaching them and helping them grow in Christ.
 - c) And it's not some squishy, huggy love; it's a love that seeks God's glory and sinful man's welfare (to meet his greatest needs in salvation and sanctification).
4. Those who do not love as Christ loved are giving indications that they might not be His disciples (they might not be Christians). Why? Because Jesus said we'd know His disciples by their love.

D. Third Quality of a Disciple: (John 15.8) Jesus' disciples will bear fruit.

1. (Gal 5.22-23) There will be fruit in Christ-like *character*.
2. (1Jn 2.6) There will be fruit in Christ in Christ-like *conduct*.
 - a) (Mat 3.7-8; 2Tim 2.19) There will be fruit of repentance—a turning from sin.
 - b) (Php 1.9-11; 1Jn 1.6; 2.2-5) There be fruit of righteousness—right living.
 - c) (Col 1.10; John 14.15, 21, 23-24) There will be fruit of good works—submission and obedience to God and His Word.
3. There will be fruit in Christ-like *conversation*.
 - a) (Heb 13.15) There will be fruit of our lips giving praise and thanks to God.
 - b) (2Cor 5.17-21; 1Cor 1.18,21 cf. Acts 4.31; 8.4) There will be fruit of preaching the gospel to the lost for their salvation.
 - c) (Eph 4.15; 1Cor 14.26) There will be fruit of speaking truth (Scripture) to the saved for their edification.
4. There will be fruit in Christ-like *converts*.
 - (John 15.16) Christ will bear fruit through His disciples who are preaching Gospel and living right and holy lives (fruit that remains... abides in Christ... continues in His Word...).

E. What does a disciple look like? He looks like a Christian, a follower of Christ: (Mat 7.16-23) Just as one can know a tree by looking at its fruit, Jesus said we can see indications of a true conversion (a true disciple) in a person's character, conduct, conversation, and converts.

Conclusion: What is a disciple?

Summary: A disciple is a Christian, a born-again believer who is growing in Christ and spiritual maturity.

- We're not talking about some super-spiritual elite or some “key program” in the church.
- We're talking about us, our whole church, everybody—we are all disciples, if we are Christians.

Review: If we desire to fulfill our purpose of glorifying God and enjoying him forever, we have to accomplish our mission and finish the work God gave us to do: Being and making disciples of the Lord.

- That is what our church is all about: Being and making disciples...Being and making Christians... Being and making followers of Christ...
- All that begins with regeneration, so we ought to be about the business of calling lost sinners to repentance and faith in Christ through biblical, intentional evangelism.
- But it doesn't stop there because God wants to conform all disciples to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. And that means we need to be about the business of edifying the saints, helping them grown in Christ.

Evaluation: A disciple (a Christian) will *look* like a disciple (a Christian). What do *we* look like?

1. A disciple will continue (abide) in Christ's Word. There will be consistency in his walk and lifestyle.
2. A disciple will have Christ-like love toward others, especially toward other believers.
3. A disciple will bear Christ-like fruit in character, conduct, conversation, and converts.

Transition: A disciple is a Christian, therefore discipleship is the “normal Christian life.”

- Since a disciple is a Christian, then the term “discipleship” simply describes the life a Christian lives.
- Discipleship is the life-long process a disciple goes through to grow in spiritual maturity.
 - ✓ It is the “normal” Christian life because anything less is not the norm that God established for every disciple—for every Christian.
 - ✓ So, in our next message (should the Lord permit) we are going talk about “discipleship”: What does the Bible say about this life-long process of spiritual growth?