

What Does It Mean to Be a Disciple?

Matthew 4:18-22

Englewood Baptist Church

Sunday Morning, May 1, 2011

Disciple. What does that word even mean? What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? That's the question I want to raise over the next few weeks. The meaning of the Word disciple is quite nebulous, isn't it? Those with a legalistic bent want to put hard and fast rules on discipleship to make it less vague and more easily followed. I can understand why. At the end of the day, we like our checklists.

I've always been a person that enjoys the classroom. I'm a little sick that way. Even now, in my doctoral classes, on the day my syllabus arrives, I get excited. My wife makes fun of me. Here is the class and all of its requirements. Do this work and do it well and you will get the grade. Maybe I like school so much because it's so easily graded. Christianity is not so easily measured on earth. That's why the word "disciple" can be so daunting. What does it mean to be a Dean's List Disciple?

Oh, how we wish that Jesus had given us a full checklist for discipleship, saying, "To be my disciple requires these 14 things... You must:

- Accept me as your personal Lord and Savior, by means of the sinners' prayer.
- Join a local church.
- Study your Bible, Old and New Testament, each and every day?
- Invest 15 minutes per day in prayer.
- Quit your job and go to seminary.
- Join a Sunday School class.
- Tithe and give 10% to your church
- Go on a mission trip every 3 years.
- Volunteer at the soup kitchen.
- Pass out 10 gospel tracts per week.
- Take the television out of your home and stop watching the following programs (and he would fill in those blanks too).

If only Christ had provided the checklist. Do these things and get an A.

If only Jesus had made it that simple. If Jesus had done that, pastors like me could put more feathers in our caps. Pastors like me could do a weekly survey of congregants and we could report how many disciples are being made. We could report more than just worship numbers or Sunday School numbers, or how much the offering count came to be. With that checklist, we could really measure progress and report disciples made. 4900 people sat in a service last week, but 2374 did these 14 things over the past week?

Perhaps then we could say that "We are making disciples."

If the role of the church is to make disciples, perhaps we should study what that means.

Look with me today, at the calling of the first disciples, in Matthew 4. Let's read these verses today and see if we can't begin to understand what Jesus means when he "calls a disciple."

Read Matthew 4:18-22.

You know, Jesus could have done it himself. Group projects are always more cumbersome than solo-assignments. Have you ever noticed that? If you don't believe me, just plan a wedding. Get a bride, a couple of mother-in-laws, a smitten groom, and some miscellaneous friends and aunts. Throw them in a room and plan a wedding. Let me say it again: group projects are always more complicated than solo assignments.

And yet, with all the power of the universe in his hands, Jesus decides to use men to win men. To use people to win people. V.18 says that Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee when he saw a few people. This lake was oval-shaped, 8 miles wide, 13 miles long. It is recorded in history books that about 240 boats fished that lake on a daily basis. Two of those fishermen were named Simon and Andrew. They were casting nets.

In those days, there were three main ways to fish the Sea. There was the good ol fashioned hook and line. There was the method of casting a net along the shallow edge of the water, along the shore. Finally, there was the dragnet method, with a huge net strung between two boats in the deep waters. Peter and Andrew were fishing here with method two, it seems. They were standing on the shore, casting nets into the water. That net was probably about 9 feet in diameter and these two brothers were skilled in using it.

The bible says that when Jesus showed up, he called the first fish-catchers of His Church. They were the first inductees in the motley crew called disciples. Christ had the right and the power to do the job alone, but he never intended to do it that way. His plan from the start was to call disciples who would win more disciples, who would win more disciples. Jesus did not choose addition, but multiplication, as his method.

Do you know, that if you take a single sheet of paper, and fold it in half 50 times, the distance will take you to moon? That's right. From 1, to 2, to 4, 8, 16, 32, 64,...keep going. Times 50 and you've gone further than the Apollo 13. That's the crazy end-result of multiplication. And that's how Jesus set up his church, to run on the gas of multiplying. I love the way Robert Coleman says it in his book, The Master Plan of Evangelism:

Men Were His Method

It all started by Jesus calling a few men to follow him. This revealed immediately the direction his evangelistic strategy would take. His concern was not with programs to reach the multitudes, but with men whom the multitudes would follow. Remarkable as it may seem, Jesus started to gather these men before he ever organized an evangelistic campaign or even preached a sermon

in public. Men were to be his method of winning the world to God.

–Robert Coleman, The Master Plan of Evangelism, p.1.

As our text today shows so well, the Master’s plan for evangelism was to use people to catch people. And so Jesus selected 12 of them. We are only given specific details about the calling of 7 of them. But make no mistake, all 12 were carefully chosen and not a single one of them came from the good stock of the day. Not one Pharisee, not one priest, not even a single member of the Sanhedrin. God always chooses his partners and the roster never makes much sense.

To put a stop to their egocentrism, Jesus later told them, “You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit (John 15:16).” The called ones are supposed to be callers. His disciples would become the fishers of men.

Now, in this one statement, found in v.19, there are three qualities required for discipleship. I’m not giving you a checklist today, nothing to add to your to-do list, but there are clearly some implications here that help us get close to the meaning of discipleship.

What Jesus Says To His First Disciples

1. Come, follow me!

Inside this phrase, we find the first implication for discipleship:

Discipleship requires a “parting.”

To disciple someone means more than to simply invite them to come. There is also a “leave that behind” element. Today, we tend to emphasize the invitation to salvation and we ask people if they are prepared to surrender their lives to Jesus Christ. He’ll give you what you really want. Sometimes, to sweeten the pot, we say things like, “Give your life to Jesus and he will make you happy.”

In some ways, this rewards-based mindset is true, because I can attest that there is no better feeling than to live inside the will of God. There is a peace that passes all understanding when the Holy Spirit lives in your heart. This doesn’t necessarily mean more money, faster pregnancies, or unexpected bonus checks. No, as with the early church, following Jesus often means that life on earth gets even tougher.

Yes, when a sinner comes home to Christ there is peace to be found and joy to be claimed! Let’s not downplay what David called “the joy of his salvation.” We gain when give your lives to Christ. Having said that, let’s also be careful that we don’t downplay the loss and the leaving behind that discipleship requires. To follow Jesus means to leave some things behind, sometimes things we once dearly loved.

Look what it says in v.20... *“At once they left their nets and followed him.” Matt. 4:20*

Being a disciple of Jesus means that we no longer can “have our cake and eat it too.” There is a “leaving” required with new living. Discipleship has an immediate cost. Does that make sense? Before you can become what he wants you to be, you must die to what you once were.

Peter and Andrew were fisherman. Not anymore! Jesus said that day is over. Now it’s time to follow me. Please don’t misinterpret the text. Don’t go tell your boss tomorrow that your preacher said, “Quit your job and follow Jesus.” Following Jesus doesn’t necessarily mean a career change. Sometimes it might, for the man who is called to ministry, or the woman who feels called to be home more with her children, it could mean this kind of lifestyle change. In Matthew’s case, it was so:

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. Matthew 9:9

Matthew never worked for the government again. Jesus called him to “leave that life” and to follow this new path.

Even in the Old Testament, this idea of leaving the old life is present. The idea of discipleship is almost completely absent in the Old Testament. It’s predominantly a New Testament idea, but you can see traces of it before Jesus shows up. Look at this passage from 1 Kings about Elijah taking on a disciple:

So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him.²⁰ Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. “Let me kiss my father and mother good-by,” he said, “and then I will come with you.”

“Go back,” Elijah replied. “What have I done to you?”

²¹ So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant. 1 Kings 19:19-21

Elisha was called to be a disciple of Elijah. And what did he do? He burned his farm equipment, slaughtered his farm animals, and had a feast to celebrate this new chapter of his life. He left the former life to follow.

And Jesus said to Peter, to Andrew, to Matthew, and to the others, “Come now, and follow me.” And they left.

You see, many people want to add Jesus to what they already have. They want to sprinkle some Jesus on top of their busy life and hope that he adds flavor. And Jesus won’t have any of that. Discipleship means dying to the old way of life, and that death process means something different for every person.

It could mean:

- Breaking off an ungodly engagement
- Loss of intimacy with family
- Giving away some money instead of hoarding it all to yourself
- Leaving old hobbies that bear no eternal fruit
- Laying down your pride and reconciling a broken relationship

I don't know what it is that the Lord is asking you to lay down, but let me make this one thing clear: at the center of discipleship is self-denial. If you want to follow Him, you have to lay down some things. You no longer claim control. Jesus says, "Come, follow me, and leave those things behind."

Now, let's go back to the second part of that call. Look what Jesus says next, in v.19, "And I will make you..."

2. And I will make you...

That statement implies that this is going to take some time. You can't get quality with a quick fix.

Discipleship requires patience.

Everybody wants custom, built-in cabinetry in their home. Wouldn't we all like that? Forget this store-bought, cookie-cutter stuff! We want authentic, hand-crafted, high-quality custom fit cabinets. The problem is: takes a lot more money and lot more time.

Discipleship is the same way. The costs of discipleship are high. Great patience is required before one can see a final product. This should encourage you!

As a spiritual leader in my home, I often feel frustrated with my skills in fatherhood and in husbandry. I want to be James Dobson mixed in with Boaz. Romantic and always right. I want to be the kind of husband that my wife can't stop talking about to her friends. I want her to sit in awe of my godliness, love, patience, and kindness. I want to be the kind of Dad that makes Ward Cleaver look bad! Smart, wise, and poised.

As a pastor, I feel that same frustration with the slow process of growth. I want to be Nehemiah who inspires with his mouth, Peter who leads from the gut, Paul who puts great truths to pen. I want to be all those things in one, but I'm not near as far along as I want to be.

This, my friends, seems to be par for the course with following Jesus. He will *make you* into a disciple, but you must be patient in the process. Just look at the first 4 disciples and you see how slow spiritual growth often is!

Even this inner circle of men were often self-centered and inhospitable. When the hungry multitude who listened to Jesus became hungry, the disciples first thought was: “send them away. Let them get their own food. That’s their problem.” (Matt. 14:15). When some little children were brought to Jesus for blessing, the disciples said “Get those kids outta here!”(19:13). Peter thought he would be extremely generous to forgive someone “up to seven times” (18:21). And of course, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter, James, and John could not stay awake with Him (26:40, 45). The disciples were selfish, proud, weak, and cowardly. They showed little potential even for dependability, much less for greatness.

And yet, and yet Jesus chose them for disciples, even to be His inner circle of twelve. They were raw material that He would make into his useful instruments.

And do you know what this means...it means...you can give yourself some grace. You may not be where you want to be, but trust me when I say, that Jesus is going somewhere with you. It’s a slow burn, but he is refining you into his finest piece of work. He did not say, “Be a fisher of men.” He said something far better: “When you follow me, I’ll make you into a fisher of men.”

Do you know what the problem with spiritual growth is? We are often the last ones to see it in ourselves. People who go a few months without seeing my children, they lay eyes on them and say, “Wow, that boy’s grown a foot.” And I look at my child and say, “Really?” He looks like he did yesterday. And he still has ketchup on his mouth. Because I am with my kids so much, I often don’t detect their growth.

The same thing is true spiritually. Sometimes it takes years to see progress, but if you will follow Jesus, and leave behind what he calls you to abandon, you can be assured that “he will carry on to completion the work he began in you.” Jesus always finishes what he starts. There are no exceptions to that rule.

Stop living in condemnation today, and say, “Lord, make me, into what you want me to be. It was the prophet Isaiah who said,

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand. Isaiah 64:8

Will you say that, to the Lord? I am the clay, you are the potter, I am the work of your hand. Make me into what YOU want me to be.

Now, let’s not miss the third part of that statement.

3. I will make you FISHERS OF MEN.

This is the purpose of discipleship. This is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. What is produced, over time, by Jesus? A person whose heart beats for people! That's what!

Discipleship results in a passion for people.

Dawson Trotman once said,

Vision is getting on your heart what God has on His. --Dawson Trotman

Let me tell you what God has on his heart! People! As we grow closer to Christ, we will go farther to serve Him! Does this mean moving to Tanzania, or Egypt, or Japan? Maybe? Does it mean giving away discretionary income to missionaries? Probably. Does this mean inviting your party-crowd, unchurched neighbors over for dinner? Perhaps. Application is as wide as the ocean sea, and we all have unique assignments in this fishing expedition. But make no mistake, every fisherman must pick up a pole.

What Jesus will do, with you, over time, through your obedience, is to involve you in the most exciting trip of your life—a fishing trip. Not for slimy, finned sea creatures, but for the sisters and brothers who are dying without hope.

Vision is getting on your heart what God has on His. I want to ask you: what's on your heart? Is it something to do with yourself? A new toy, a new house, a new car, a new gadget, a new investment, a new swimming pool for the summer. Nothing wrong with those things, but Jesus didn't appoint you as his disciple to bear much treasure. No, he said,

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. John 15:16

Jesus chose the strategy: to win men with men. And this global mission is not institutional, but individual. It's not the Englewood Baptist Church that is called to make disciples, but every person that belongs to Englewood Baptist Church. If you are a disciple, then God wants to make you a discipler. He wants to use you to bear fruit—fruit that will last.