



Following Jesus ...

what it means

Jesus said, "Come, follow Me"

What it means to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ

Brian Caughley

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A very important note ...

These Bible studies are designed to challenge and encourage Christians to live life as a follower (disciple) of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are *not* intended to bring people into condemnation, or to make people feel inadequate, or that it is hopeless trying to be a Christian because it is too difficult.

Therefore ...

Please read these studies prayerfully, asking God to speak to you through His Word, guide you, and enable you to do all that He calls you to do. He has created each one of us, chosen us, called us, and will equip us to do His will in our lives if we ask Him – and let Him!

"We proclaim Him – the Lord Jesus Christ – admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone complete (perfect and mature) in Christ"

Colossians 1:28

1 Am I a Disciple, or Only “Born Again”?

John 3:3-8 and 1 Peter 1:3, 23

In recent years the term “born again” has been used a lot, especially in evangelical circles, for example, in the United States. Evangelicals have been keen to differentiate between nominal Christians and true believers who have been “born again”.

Interestingly enough, although the term “born again” has been used so much, it only occurs four times, in two passages of Scripture (John 3:3, 7 and 1 Peter 1:3, 23). The term “born of the Spirit” only occurs three times (John 3:5, 6, 8).

So the term “born again” is not used very much in Scripture at all! This does not mean that it is not important, but perhaps we have over-emphasized it to the exclusion of other terms and concepts.

One problem is that a person may have been born again many years ago, but it may not have any real relevance today. Today they may not be living a life that is honouring to God at all.

Even the word “Christian” only occurs three times in Scripture (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16).

The term that *does* occur frequently in Scripture is the word “disciple”. In fact, it occurs 272 times in the New Testament. It is far more important that we are disciples right now, than that we were “born again” many years ago!

This is not to say that we should stop using the terms “born again”, “born of the Spirit” or “Christian” - far from it. But we need to emphasize the fact, far more than we are currently doing, that all Christians should be disciples.

What does it mean to be a disciple?

To be a disciple of Christ means that we are a follower of Jesus Christ: we follow His teaching, His lifestyle, His example. We learn from Him and we obey Him. We seek to honour Him by what we say about Him and how we follow His example.

To be a disciple, then, is to hear, to do, to obey, to sit at His feet, to learn, to talk with, to follow the example of, to grow to be like, Jesus. It is a long-term (in fact, lifetime) relationship with Jesus Christ.

This is far more than only having a past experience of being “born again”. It is a permanent, on-going, relationship that radically affects every aspect of our daily lives - our way of thinking, our speech, our actions, our relationships with other people, our choices, and so on. It is to pray “Thy will be done here on earth even as it is in Heaven” - and include God’s will being done here and now in my life too!

Am I a disciple, or only “born again”? This is a challenging, but very important question that we all need to answer!

Disciples sat at the feet of their Teacher. They listened, they learned, they read their words, they obeyed their teachings, they followed their Teacher, just as Jesus' twelve disciples followed Him, John the Baptist's disciples followed him, and Paul sat at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3).

This was why Jesus said to each of His disciples (and to the rich young ruler too), "Follow Me". It was an invitation to a life-transforming experience. In one sense it was a command, but in another sense it was one which people could refuse (as the rich young ruler did).

To follow and to obey meant that one was like the wise man who built his house upon the rock. To choose not to follow, or to disobey, was to be like the foolish man who built his house upon the sand (Matt. 7:24-27).

Am I a disciple, or only "born again"? 1 Peter 2:20-21 says "If, when you do what is right and suffer for it, and you take it patiently, then you have God's approval. For you have been called to this, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that **you should follow in His steps.**" This is the essence of being a disciple: following in Jesus' steps - seeking to think as He thought, speaking as He would speak, acting as He would have you act, following His leading and guiding day by day. (See also Hebrews 12:1-2).

This will obviously affect every aspect of our daily life, every decision, and so on. It calls for total commitment. Jesus' disciples were not part-time, they were full-time!

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven", He was not just talking about God's will for the earth in general, but God's will for their lives in particular. Jesus Himself said that He only did those things which He saw His Father doing (John 5:19-20). This was why Jesus spent so much time in prayer and waiting on His Father - to know His will and do it. No wonder Jesus was so successful in everything He did!

Compare this with Psalm 1:1-3 "Blessed is the man ... whose delight is in the Law of the Lord (God's Word), and on His Law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither (it is ever-green). In **all** that he does, he prospers"!

Hearing, reading, meditating on, and obeying God's Word will cause us to prosper in God.

Similarly, God told Joshua: "This book of the Law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way **prosperous**, and then you shall have **good success**" (Jos. 1:9).

We therefore have a very important choice to make. As Joshua put it: "If you are unwilling to serve the Lord, then choose today who you will serve - the false gods your fathers served in Egypt or the false gods of the heathen people around about you. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Jos. 24:15).

Jesus said, "If any one wishes (or **desires**) to come after Me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). Some people say they haven't got the time; in reality they haven't got the desire! (See, for example, Luke 9:57-62)

The Teacher - Disciple relationship

The relationship between a teacher (or master) and his followers in Biblical times was a lot more personal and committed than the relationship between teachers and students today, but there are similarities.

Five aspects which have parallels between a teacher and his disciples in olden days, and the Lord and us (as His disciples) today are:

1. The disciple spent much time with his teacher, listening to him and talking with him. Likewise, the disciple of Christ today will spend much time with Him in prayer and meditation.
2. The disciple or learner would read his teacher's books or writings or letters. Similarly, disciples today will want to read, study, meditate on and learn off by heart, God's Word (the Bible).
3. The disciple will want to watch what his teacher is doing, learn and obey what he says. Obedience is critical to Christian discipleship today. What is our Teacher saying? Are we obedient?
4. The disciple will want to discuss what he has learnt with his peers. Fellowship amongst the disciples is important. Christians (followers of Christ) should eagerly look forward to fellowship with other Christians - other disciples of Christ.
5. As the disciple learns and practices what he has been taught, he will be eager to share his knowledge and experience with others. In fact, the best two ways to learn are to *do* and to *teach others*. Christian witness is the way Christ's disciples share with others what they have learnt from their Master.

The above five ways can be summed up, respectively, with the words: **PRAYER, BIBLE STUDY, OBEDIENCE, FELLOWSHIP and WITNESS.**

These five things are *fundamental* to successful Christian living, to growth and maturity. We cannot (and must not) avoid any of them!

QUESTIONS

"Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24)

The following questions are for personal reflection. They are not intended to bring condemnation but rather to exhort us to true Christian discipleship and living.

1. When did I last spend 15 minutes (or more) in prayer, either by myself or with other people?
2. When did I last read a chapter (or more) of the Bible?

3. Are there areas of my life which I know are displeasing to God and which I am making no effort to change?
4. How often do I fellowship and worship with God's people?
5. When did I last speak to a non-Christian about the Lord?
6. Am I a disciple, or only "born again"?

Your honest answers to these questions will reveal much about your spiritual life and whether you are a disciple, or merely "born again"!

Romans 12:1-2

"I appeal to you therefore, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect".

2 "Come, Follow Me!"

What it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ

Matthew's Gospel ends with the words of Jesus: "All authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20).

Around the world, many millions of people have become Christians, having put their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. Many millions have been baptised and call themselves "Christians". But what does it mean to be a true **disciple** of Jesus Christ – a true Christian?

One of the problems is that many people have received the love and forgiveness which Jesus offers and try (at least when it suits them) to live the Christian life. But many Christians are still "babies in Christ". They have been born again but have not really gone on into Christian maturity and discipleship. They are happy to have the benefits of being a Christian, calling themselves "Christians", glad that God forgives their sin and that they will one day be with Him in Heaven. They are happy to call God "Father" and to know that He loves and cares for them, watches over them and meets their needs. But there is more to discipleship than this!

A disciple is a truly committed follower of his or her Master – one who follows in the footsteps of their leader; one who obeys their teaching and emulates their lifestyle.

Take true Christian love, for example. Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. This is how people will know that you are My disciples – by your love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Jesus’ disciples should have a love for each other that is unsurpassed in this world! Do we love other Christians in the same way that Jesus loves us? Is Christianity known throughout the world as a faith in which the followers supremely love each other? Why, then, are we so often divided?

In Antioch the disciples were first called “Christians” – followers of Christ (Acts 11:26). People saw their lives, witnessed their example, saw the character of Christ in their lives and called them Christians.

Are our lives such that people would call us a Christian because we are so Christ-like? Hopefully! Do they see us as true followers of Christ?

Tragically, the lives some Christians live bring shame on the Name of Christ and on the Christian Church. Now there are times when we all sin, and we need to immediately repent, confess our sin, ask God’s forgiveness (and possibly the forgiveness of other people), but if we choose to live a sinful life and a sinful lifestyle then we should not dishonour the Name of Christ and the Body of Christ by calling ourselves Christians.

Philippians 2:9-11 tells us that God has given Jesus Christ a Name which is above every other name, and we need to honour and respect that Name by the lives we live!

So a true Christian is a true disciple of Jesus Christ. But what does a disciple of Jesus Christ look like? In the rest of this study we will look at some of the characteristics of a true disciple of Jesus Christ – what we should be like!

It begins with the call of God

A disciple is a follower. Jesus saw two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, who were fishermen. He said to them “Follow Me” and immediately they left their fishing nets and followed Him. He saw two more brothers, James and John, and He called them. Immediately they left their fishing boat, and their father, and followed Him (Matt. 4:18-22). Later He saw Matthew, a tax collector, and said to him “Follow Me” and Matthew got up from his tax booth and followed Him (Matt. 9:9). Similarly He called the rest of the 12 to be His disciples – and they followed Him.

Following Christ *may* involve forsaking things which are good and legitimate in themselves, but which are a hindrance to us becoming a disciple. Most of us are not called to leave our jobs or our family in order to follow Christ, but some are.

Total commitment

In Luke 9:23 Jesus puts the cost of discipleship very clearly when He says, “If anyone wants to become My follower (disciple) let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Me”.

To deny ourselves is to be willing to give up good and legitimate things, *if necessary*, in order to follow the Lord. To take up our cross is to die to the flesh, die to our own desires and put God's will first in our lives (Matt. 6:33). This was the example Christ gave us, when He said He came to do the will of the Father Who sent Him (John 4:34; 5:30). A number of Scriptures show us that the success of Jesus' life and ministry was due to the fact that He only did what He saw the Father doing, and was obedient to His Father in all things. He paid the price, and so must we, in order to be obedient children of God and to follow in His steps (1 Pet. 2:21).

Obedience in *all* areas of our lives

This is not easy! Most of us are willing to be obedient in many or most areas of our lives, but most of us also want to hold on to things which we know are not God's will. Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15) – not that God's commandments are designed to be a burden! Ultimately they are for our good and the good of others. But sometimes we don't see it that way!

Total love for our Master

Obviously, to follow Jesus in this way we must be totally committed in our love for our Lord. Jesus said the greatest of all the commandments is to love the Lord our God with all our heart (spirit), soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:29-30). If we are committed to Him in this way, then obedience becomes less of a problem!

The flesh will struggle against this but this is precisely why we are told to "die to the flesh", to "crucify the flesh" and to live in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-25).

Knowing God and hearing His voice

Obviously, if we are to follow Christ in this way, we need to know Him and learn to hear His voice. See John 10:1-5, 27-29. The disciple learns to listen to His Master's voice!

Primarily God speaks to us through His revealed Word, the Bible. This is the written, authoritative, divinely-inspired Word of God. It was given for our instruction – to lead us in God's ways. One of the tragedies of today's Christian world is that Christians spend *far* more time reading books and articles (including this one!), listening to speakers or tapes, or watching videos *about* God's Word than they do reading, studying and meditating on God's Word itself. Largely we are "second hand" students of God's Word – we get it from others instead of from God Himself!

As well as God's written Word, God also speaks to us by His Spirit. This is much more subjective and needs to be tested by the Bible, but God's Spirit can and will speak to us, guide us and help us as we wait on Him. We need to learn to lay aside our own desires, if they are not of God, in order to hear what *is* of God. It is very easy to believe that **God** wants us to do what *we* want to do! This may be the case, but at times it may not! We need to test our motives! (See James 4:1-3). These things the true disciple of Christ will seek to do!

QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference (if any) between a “born again Christian” and a “disciple of Jesus”?
 2. Why have Christians always had such a problem achieving Christian unity?
 3. What are some of the major characteristics of the life of Christ which Christians should be seeking to emulate?
 4. What are some of the major things which non-Christians see in the Church that puts them off becoming Christians? What can we do about this?
 5. What is the difference between a “weight” and a “sin” (Heb. 12:1)?
 6. What does it mean to die to the flesh and live by the Spirit (Gal. 5:24-25)?
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3 What it means to be a disciple

A disciple of Jesus is a Christian who is ...

- (a) a follower of Jesus Christ (Acts 11:26)
- (b) a learner (e.g., Luke 11:1)
- (c) a person who seeks to live their life according to the pattern and teachings of Christ (Matt. 10:24-25a)

In order to do this, the disciple must stay close to their Lord even through difficult times (see John 6:60, 66). Our Master will spend much time with His disciples and will pour Himself out especially for them. He will teach and show them things that He may not show or explain to casual observers (see Matt. 13:10-11, 36; 24:3; Mark 6:30-32; 9:28-29; 13:3-4; Luke 9:10; 10:23-24; John 15:15). In a sense, the disciple is part of an “inner circle” of Jesus’ friends, with whom He will share Himself intimately. However, this is not exclusive, in the sense that **any** Christian can be a disciple if they are willing to learn, be trained and make changes to their life, in order to follow Him fully. Sadly, many Christians are satisfied with a lot less!

The disciple lays aside worldly hindrances

See Hebrews 12:1-2. There are “weights” (hindrances) which are not sins in themselves, but will certainly hinder our close walk with the Lord. There were several people Jesus called to be disciples but who had other “legitimate” things they wanted to do first. One had got married, one had bought some cattle, one wanted to bury his father first, one wanted to say farewell to his family first (Matt. 8:19-22; Luke 9:57-62; 14:16-20). But excuses will always keep us from a close walk with the Lord.

The disciple is willing to pay the price

Jesus spelled out the cost clearly in Luke 14:25-33. Taking up a “cross” daily means we have to die to our own selves and desires daily, and live for Him. Not just on Sundays – every day! Not just sometimes – always! Not just things we are happy to give up – but everything He asks us to give up! Not just things which are easy to give up – but the hard things too! But it is worth it!

The disciple listens to their Master, and obeys!

This means we need to fast and pray, wait on God, listen to Him and obey Him. There is no point God telling us more things if we haven’t obeyed the things He has already told us. It will also mean that the Master and His disciples will spend a lot of time together. The Master “pours Himself out for His disciples” – inputting into them His knowledge, wisdom, experience, character and so on, so that His disciples become like Him.

Just as Jesus spent much time with His Father and said, “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:8-11) so the character of Jesus should be seen in His disciples. (Of course, Jesus is God so there is a unique oneness He had with the Father that we can never have, in that sense). But the disciple will seek to follow Christ’s example and to become like Him, as far as possible.

Jesus’ disciples are filled with the same Spirit as He was, and so become of like nature to Him.

Jesus’ disciples will continue in His Word – that is, they will continue to live by His teachings and the principles of His Word. They will know the truth and the truth will set them free! (John 8:31-36).

So Jesus’ disciples will be people of prayer (including fasting and worship), people of the Word and people who obey. The disciple will know God’s Word (“his Master’s voice”) and live by it, day by day.

The disciple will teach others too

The principle of discipleship is not only that we need to be discipled, but we need to help others become disciples too. Disciples impart what they have learned to others. In fact, the best way to learn is to practice what you hear and then teach others (in that order!) See Acts 1:1 (Jesus “*did*” and then He “*taught*”); John 20:21 and 2 Timothy 2:2. We need to pass on what we have learned, to others.

The disciple is a person of humility

“The disciple is not above his Master; it is enough to become like Him” (Matt. 10:24-25; Luke 6:40). As a disciple, a learner, we are in a place of humility, serving our Master. A disciple is not the “boss”. This was the whole point of Jesus washing His disciples feet (John 13:3-17) – here was the Master doing the menial task because His disciples were too proud to wash one another’s feet, so Jesus taught them this object lesson in humility and serving. The

disciple has a servant heart; his one desire is to hear His Master say “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into your Master’s joy” (Matt. 25:21).

The disciple avoids all hindrances to discipleship

There are many pitfalls to discipleship and Christian leadership. The world, the flesh and the devil are three very strong opponents of success in the Christian life.

The world: Following the world’s example and giving in to the pressures of the world around about us. This can be very subtle because the things in themselves may not be sinful, but are hindrances to our walk with the Lord. This is why Hebrews 12:1-2 tells us to lay aside every sin and weight that so easily hinders us. In every sport there are rules, and it is a “sin” to break these rules – people or teams will be penalised if they break the rules. But while it is not a sin to carry a heavy weight with us while we compete, it certainly will not help our performance! It is a sin for a runner to cut the corner in a race, and they will be disqualified if they do. It is not a sin to carry a shot-put in each hand while they run, but it certainly won’t help them win the race! Likewise, there are sins we must avoid in the Christian life and hindrances that will not help our Christian walk – we need to lay these aside.

The flesh: Wrong carnal desires which we sometimes give in to. So often “the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41) and this is precisely why we need to learn to die to all sinful fleshly desires.

The devil: Even the most Godly Christians, who have turned their backs on the world and died to the flesh, will still face attacks of the devil to discourage them, side-track them, tempt them to give up, cause them to doubt, fear, etc. We are in a spiritual battle and, in a very real sense, the more effective we become for God and His Kingdom, the more the devil will oppose us. After all, in any battle, you concentrate on those who are the greatest threat to you, and don’t worry too much about those who are little or no threat! The devil does the same! Rather than be discouraged by spiritual opposition when we are doing God’s will, we should not be surprised, but rejoice that we are being effective for God! (1 Pet. 4:12-14).

The three G’s

It has been said that three of the most harmful things to Christian leadership are the three G’s: Glory, Gold and Girls! (or pride, money and immorality).

Glory: Pride in what they have achieved, kingdom-building, titles, big names, “power” and “authority”, etc., can be the downfall of those who are being used by God. Pride (and/or insecurity) often manifests itself in a very heavy authoritarian spirit. The disciples wanted to know who was going to be greatest or first in the Kingdom of Heaven and Jesus taught them a lesson which hopefully they never forgot (Mark 9:33-37). At least Peter said, “Humble yourselves under the hand of God that in due season He may exalt you” (1 Pet. 5:1-6). The disciple’s heart attitude **must** be one of humility and servitude. The glory is to God and God alone, since He is the One who enables us to do anything we achieve anyway!

Gold: Tragically, many people who do not start off with a strong desire for money and materialistic things can end up seeking them. As the glory comes, so does the desire to keep up an image – and that image is often not the spiritual image but a materialistic one. Money,

wealth, possessions, homes, cars, a wealthy lifestyle can easily corrupt an otherwise good ministry if our hearts become set on them. The rich young ruler, presumably, never entered the Kingdom of God because his wealth became a stumbling block to him (Luke 18:18-30). Judas' heart was also corrupted by his desire for money, so that he even stole money from Jesus and the disciples! (John 12:4-6). The Bible says, "Be content with what you have" (Phil. 4:11-13; 1 Tim. 6:6-10).

Girls: Sexual immorality has destroyed many ministries. The Bible says, "Flee from fornication" (1 Cor. 6:18-20; Eph. 5:3-5). Fornication is a sexual relationship with anyone to whom we are not married, and includes adultery and homosexuality.

The Christian disciple must, with God's help, overcome the world, the flesh and the devil; and temptations to pride, materialistic greed and immorality (amongst other things).

Finally ...

To be a true disciple of Jesus Christ is to have a life-changing encounter with Christ, one that will change your life for the rest of your life; it is life-long, not temporary! Don't just start well – continue well and finish well!

Our great desire should be to hear our Master say, at the end of our life: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into your Master's joy!" (Matt. 25:21).

QUESTIONS

1. Why is discipleship more than just "believing"?
2. What is the difference between a "weight" and a "sin"? Name some weights which are not sins.
3. How do we "take up our cross daily" (Luke 9:23) and "die daily" (1 Cor. 15:31)?
4. What is the significance of *first* "doing", and *then* "teaching" (not the other way around)?
5. What is meant by "the world, the flesh and the devil", and how can we overcome them?
6. How can Christians guard themselves against pride, materialism and immorality?

4 The Disciple and Discipline

Often, when Jesus' disciples are mentioned, we think of the twelve disciples but it is obvious from Acts 6:1, 2, 7 that the term "disciple" was used for any follower of Jesus Christ, not necessarily one of the twelve. Acts 6:7 says "the number of disciples in Jerusalem multiplied greatly". So to be a disciple of Jesus is to be a person who believes in Him and seeks to

follow His example. In fact, the words “disciple” and “disciples” are used 31 times in the book of Acts and do not necessarily refer to the twelve disciples.

The disciple and discipline

In English, the words “disciple” and “discipline” only differ by the two letters “in”. To be a disciple of Christ is to be one who is disciplined to follow Him. It is not easy to be a disciple of Christ because He set the highest of all possible standards, in every way. In thought, word and deed we are to walk in His steps and follow His example. Imperfect though we are, and even though at times we will fail to follow Him perfectly, nevertheless this should be the aim of every true disciple. A disciple is a disciplined one.

There are several major areas where we need to discipline our lives in order to follow Him:

- Prayer and fasting
- Reading, studying and meditating on God’s Word
- Fellowship with other believers
- Commitment, service and ministry
- Witness
- Self-control
- Holiness – in body, soul and spirit; thought, word and deed

As we are all very well aware, these things do not come easily to most of us, but as disciples we should be growing and maturing in these areas so that they become an integral part of our lives.

Sometimes it may seem to be an impossible goal to achieve, and in one sense it is. We can only do this through the strength that God “mightily inspires” within us (Col. 1:29). We “all fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) but this is no excuse for not trying and, when we do fail, confessing our sins and shortcomings, receiving God’s forgiveness and then getting up and continuing to follow Him.

Besides, Jesus never did say it would be easy. “The gate is narrow, and the way is hard, that leads to life, and few find it!” Jesus said (Matt. 7:14).

The three baptisms

John the Baptist spoke of three baptisms (Matt. 3:11). He said that he **baptised with water** as a sign of repentance and the washing away of sin, but that Jesus would **baptise with the Holy Spirit** and He would also **baptise with fire**.

To be a Christian, we must repent of our sins, ask God’s forgiveness and receive the cleansing of Jesus’ Blood which washes away our sins forever. This is symbolised by our **water baptism**.

But the Bible says we also need to be **baptised with the Holy Spirit**, and we will receive power after the Holy Spirit has come upon us (Acts 1:8). This is not only the power to do miracles and gain victory over the enemy, but also the power to live a victorious, Godly Christian life so that we will be witnesses to Him, both by the lives we live and the words we say. There’s not much use preaching the Gospel if we’re not *living* the Gospel! If the Good

News is not working in our lives; if we are not doing our utmost to live for Him; then why bother trying to tell others about it?

The baptism with fire is the testing of our faith, sometimes under severe circumstances; the purifying work of God's Spirit to make us more like Christ. Sometimes the fire exposes what is underneath: in the case of Peter, fear led him to deny his relationship with Jesus (John 18:17, 25-27); in Joseph of Arimathea's case, fear led him to be a secret disciple (John 19:38). In any case, God wants to lay the axe at the root of all evil, cut it off at the root and destroy it with fire (Matt. 3:8-12). Let's get rid of all the chaff!

The Sower and the Seed

In the parable of the sower and the seed, good seed was sown but it fell on four different types of soil. The varying results were not due to different types of seed but to different types of soil.

The hard soil did not receive the seed at all. It fell on the hard surface but the surface resisted its penetration. Consequently, in a very short time the birds of the air (a symbol of the enemy) came and devoured the seed so that the hard soil was totally unproductive. This is a picture of those people who resist the Gospel to such a degree that it is taken away from them and becomes unfruitful in their lives.

The shallow soil did have soil on the top and the seed was received into it. In fact, it sprouted up and began to show signs of life and growth. But the soil was shallow and superficial. When the sun shone and things got too hot, there was no depth of soil into which the roots could penetrate; no water at depth which it could draw upon, and the plant just withered and died. It had "no root in itself" – it could grow in superficial conditions but not under testing circumstances. This stony soil was a mixture of soil and stones, and was not of sufficient quality to sustain life for long.

The thorny soil contained good soil but also thorns and weeds, and the problem was that the thorns and weeds choked the seed to death; it succumbed to the surrounding weeds and could not compete, let alone win. Jesus said that the weeds represented the cares of this world – worldliness and worldly ways which will choke spiritual life. Related to this is the need to beware of those who are false, speaking perverse things and seeking to draw away disciples after them – Paul warned the Christians of this in Acts 20:29-31. These people are also "thorns" who will choke the true Word of God in order to gain a following. True Christians are disciples of Jesus Christ, not of men!

The good soil, however, produced a harvest. The seed grew, matured and produced fruit. But even so, some of it only produced 30 times as much, while some produced 60 times as much and some 100 times. The disciplined life of the true Christian disciple *will* produce fruit. We may not all produce the same multiplication but we will be fruitful. If we are listening to God and doing what He says, good fruit is inevitable – fruit that will glorify God and bring blessing to those around us.

So ...

- Let us *never* resist the words God brings us. Let us listen and obey.
- Let us *never* allow ourselves to be shallow, but allow God's words to do a deep work in our lives that will last, even under times of testing, when the heat is on.

- Let us *never* tolerate weeds and thorns choking what God has told us. Let us deal with them – root them out and burn them with fire!
- Let us *always* allow God’s words to be fruitful in our lives, by receiving them and acting on them.

The disciple reproduces

How does the Kingdom of God grow? By disciples in turn discipling other disciples! What we have learned, we need to pass on to others. It may be to our own children, to children in Sunday School and youth groups, to young people through various Christian groups, to other friends and family, to those who are right outside our circle of Christian friends – neighbours, people we work or study with, those on the streets, or wherever. Jesus said, “This is how My Father is glorified – that you bear much fruit; so you shall be My disciples” (John 15:8).

Disciples and apostles

In Luke 6:13 we are told that Jesus “called His disciples and He chose twelve of them, whom He also named apostles” (Greek: *apostolos* = one who is sent forth). “Apostolos” is the Greek equivalent of the Latin word for “Missionary” – a person who is sent forth on a mission, to do a task. Jesus “sent forth” these twelve apostles on a “mission” (see Luke 9:1-6). Later He sent forth 72 apostles on a mission (see Luke 10:1-20) – probably each of the 12 took 5 others with them on the second mission. A Christian (disciple) whom God calls and sends forth on a mission to propagate the Gospel is an apostle. Every Christian missionary is an apostle. In a more general sense, *all* Christians are apostles – we have all been chosen by God, called, saved and sent forth to share the Gospel wherever in the world we happen to be!

Jesus said, “Come, follow Me!” Will we respond by saying “Yes, Lord!” and become a true disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ?

QUESTIONS

1. In what areas do you find it hard to be disciplined, and how is God helping you to work through these areas into a greater measure of discipline?
2. Why is it so important that we really know what is involved before we ask God to “send the fire” on us or our church?
3. In what areas of your life (if any) do you feel there is hard soil, stony soil or weeds which choke God’s word to you? What are you doing about this?
4. In what ways is God using you to reproduce spiritual truths and practices which you have learned, in the lives of others?
5. When does a disciple become an apostle? (See Mark 3:13-15 and Acts 13:1-4)?
6. How is God the Father glorified, and how do we demonstrate that we are true disciples of Christ (John 15:8)?

5 Five disciplines for disciples

1. Learning the Word of God: The Bible

A disciple listens to what his Master teaches, and seeks to follow after His example and teaching. So one thing which is of prime importance to followers of Jesus is that they know His Word. God has given us the Bible in which His eternal Word has been recorded, for our inspiration, encouragement, teaching and guidance. In fact, His Word, like the prophetic word, is for “edification (to build us up), exhortation (to encourage us) and comfort (help, strength and inspiration in the time of need)”. See 1 Corinthians 14:3.

There are a number of ways we can approach the Bible:

Reading God’s Word: This is probably the main way in which most Christians approach the Bible, most of the time. By reading a chapter or more of the Bible at a time, it gives us a good overview of what the Bible says and teaches, and we also see verses in their context. A Bible commentary can be useful for gaining greater depth and understanding of the passage.

Studying God’s Word: This involves looking at God’s Word in greater depth, possibly studying a topic (for which a concordance is very useful) or using a Bible commentary which explains the passage.

Meditating on God’s Word: Meditating involves looking closely at a verse (or maybe 2 or 3 verses) and examining it word by word, phrase by phrase, asking God to speak to us through it.

Memorizing God’s Word: This enables us to recall certain passages off by heart and enables God’s Spirit to speak to us through them, no matter where we are or when. It also enables us to use God’s Word when we don’t have a Bible handy, and it teaches us where verses are in the Bible! Ideal for witnessing!

2. Talking with God: Prayer

Discipleship grows out of Relationship. So, while we need to know God’s Word, we also need to know God Himself and to fellowship with Him in prayer. Prayer, in its broadest sense, involves both talking to God and listening to God. God speaks to us through His Word, the Bible; He also talks to us by His Spirit. We need to listen to both!

Prayer, in its broadest sense, involves worshipping God for Who He is – the Almighty God, the Creator, our Saviour, our Father, His Son and the Holy Spirit. It also involves expressing our gratitude and thanks to Him for all He has done. It involves confession of our sin and (positively) the confession of our faith in Him. It involves prayer for our own needs and the needs of other people. It involves standing against every attack of the evil one, in Jesus’ Name.

On some occasions God may call us to **fast and pray** – to discipline ourselves in this way so that we say no to food for a period of time so that we can concentrate more on seeking Him, and discipline our bodies by not eating.

Waiting on God, in silence, allows His Spirit time to speak to us in “a still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12). Hearing God’s voice enables us to have communion with Him at the deepest level; to love Him, worship Him and to know Him intimately. Often we are just too busy, and even when we do stop and pray, often our minds are **still** busy! This is why Jesus told His disciples to “Come aside and rest awhile” (Mark 6:31); why we need to fast and pray and spend time waiting on God (Matt. 11:28-30).

3. Fellowshiping with other disciples: The Church

When we became Christians, God put us into a Body – the Body of Christ – we became part of the Christian Church. The Church is there to help us, encourage us, correct us (sometimes!), give us the opportunity to serve other people, and so on. We are not meant to be isolated Christians, each doing our own thing. We need each other!

It is easy, by ourselves, to go off on a tangent, to get into error and so on. The properly-functioning Church has a “correcting influence” on its members. These are some of the reasons that God says “... provoke one another to love and to good deeds. Don’t stop meeting together, as some people do, but encourage each other ...” (Heb. 10:24-25).

There are a number of ways the church meets in practice. Some people have one or two prayer partners or people they share with often and intimately; there are small group meetings (e.g., home groups, Bible study groups); there are the usual Sunday services where larger numbers gather together for worship, prayer, teaching, etc. On occasions, the church in a town or city will gather together for a special purpose, and there are national and international gatherings of God’s people. As far as possible it is good to be involved in all these ways of meeting together with other brothers and sisters in Christ. Psalm 133 reminds us of the special blessing of meeting together as brothers and sisters, in unity!

4. Sharing our faith: Witness

It is wonderful knowing God – knowing Him as our Lord, Saviour and Friend. But we aren’t meant to keep Him to ourselves – He is for sharing with others!

Some of our sharing may be in acts of kindness and love, which demonstrate our faith. Other times we may seek to share with someone what God means to us. Both **word** and **deed** are important! Some people need to see our faith in action before they will ever listen to our words! At other times we may not be with a person for very long, and a word, prompted by the Holy Spirit, may be a powerful witness and testimony to the person we are speaking to. Ultimately, of course, even our deeds need to be followed up by words (sometimes through another person), because people need to hear the Gospel and receive it in order to be saved (Rom. 10:9-17; 1 Cor. 3:6-9).

5. Obeying our Master: Obedience

We cannot be a true disciple if we do not have a deep desire to be obedient to what we are told and so show our love and devotion to Him (“If you love Me you will keep My

commandments”, Jesus said – John 14:15). We may not always succeed perfectly, but we must do our best to obey Him.

Even the best of disciples sometimes fail their Master! Peter denied three times that he knew Jesus. At Jesus’ crucifixion His disciples deserted Him. **But** God has made a way of reconciliation: repentance, confession and forgiveness! See 1 John 1:5 to 2:2.

Part of the call of the disciple is to ministry and service. Part of the reason we have been saved, and the reason why God leaves us on earth after we are saved, is to serve! We are all “ministers of the Gospel” in the broad sense of that term. We are called to serve, to minister, to witness, to be a part of the building up of God’s Kingdom here on earth. In order to do this, and to do it effectively, not just in our own strength but in God’s power, we are told to “be constantly filled with God’s Holy Spirit” (Eph. 5:18) – to live and minister in the power which God’s Spirit supplies.

The Master has shown us the way; we are called to follow in it. For example:

Matthew 6:19-34. Jesus said that we should not be concerned with storing up wealth here on earth, but to lay up spiritual treasure (things which *really* matter) in Heaven. Material things get stolen, decay or lose their value, but eternal things don’t. Besides, our heart will really be where our treasure is. No one can serve two masters because there will always be conflict. We cannot serve God and material wealth and possessions. Materialism will always detract from true discipleship. Anyway, we don’t need to worry about material things for the same God Who provides for plants and birds and animals will surely provide – all the more! – for His sons and daughters. Why worry about these things? Worry rarely achieves anything positive, and is usually destructive. Instead, “Seek *first* the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you” (v. 33). Live one day at a time, and live it for the glory of God! Jesus did, and so can we!

Mark 12:28-31. What is the greatest of all the commandments? Some people think that it is “Do unto others as you would have them do to you”, but it isn’t! Some people think it is “Love your neighbour as you love yourself”, but it isn’t! Many “good” non-Christians wish these were the most important commandments, but they aren’t! Jesus said the greatest of all the commandments (and the others flow out from it) is: “You shall love the Lord your God with **all** your heart and with **all** your soul and with **all** your mind and with **all** your strength” (that’s four “all’s”!) This is what the true disciple of Jesus Christ will seek to do – imperfectly at times, but nevertheless this is our supreme aim and goal. “So help me, God!”

QUESTIONS

1. Why is memorising God’s Word so important? Why is it so neglected today?
2. How do we grow in intimacy with God?
3. Do Christians have to “go to church”? Why or why not?
4. Why can’t I simply witness by my good deeds? Why do people need to be told the Gospel?
5. Can I be a true disciple of Christ if I am constantly disobedient to Him?

6. In what way does the whole of discipleship depend on obedience to the greatest of all the commandments?
-

6 Christian Character

When we look at the Christians around us, what do we see? Most of us make judgements about other people quite quickly – we see something we like, or dislike, and make up our minds quite quickly as to what we think of them. But many of our judgements, especially our first assessments, are based on outward appearances rather than the person's true character. We see their outward personality, sometimes their outward show, and judge accordingly.

What we are *inwardly*, is far more important than what we are *outwardly*. Yet most people spend far more time and money on their outward appearance than their inner character! Inner character is often developed in the place of prayer, in God's presence, in reading and meditating on His Word. A mirror shows us our outward appearance, but God's Word and God's Spirit reveal our inner nature, if we will allow Him to speak to us!

On the Day of Judgement, we will be judged by what we are on the inside, not what we look like on the outside. That's why, when we die, it doesn't matter if we have lost our hair or our eyesight or memory or teeth, or are old and wrinkly! But our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, our relationship with our family, our friends and other people, our inner nature and character, are very important.

If you read Matthew 6:1-8 and 16-18, you will see that the words "in secret" occur 6 times, with regard to giving, praying and fasting. God is not at all impressed by outward show, even if people are. God sees in secret; God knows in secret.

For example, in Matthew 23:1-28 we see that Jesus had some very strong words to say about the scribes and Pharisees of His day. Many people looked up to these scribes and Pharisees and saw them as righteous (rather than self-righteous!) leaders, but Jesus saw their inner motives and character. Jesus said that what they taught was all right, but they didn't practice what they preached! (v. 3). James warned that people should not be over-eager to become teachers because those who teach are without excuse – they know the truth, and woe to them if they do not live up to what they teach! God has no time for religious hypocrites.

What you are in secret, you are!

1 Samuel 16:1-13 (especially verse 7) demonstrates a very important principle. What really matters, is what God sees, not what people see. What really matters is who we are in secret, not who we pretend to be in public.

God chose David, not Eliab. Even Samuel, when he looked on Eliab, thought "Surely this is the Lord's anointed", but he wasn't. Neither were any of the other brothers, except David.

What did Samuel see in Eliab?

Samuel looked on Eliab's outward appearance and thought he would make a great king. Samuel saw his height, his age (he was the eldest) and his inheritance (as the eldest, he would be the successor to his father) but he did not see his jealousy (17:28), anger and false accusation against David. Of Eliab, the Lord said, "The Lord does not see as people see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (16:7).

What did God see in David?

David was a worshipper. Many of the Psalms were written by David. David was a person of faith. He had strength and yet humility. He was obedient. Of David, the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him, for this is the one" (16:12). So David was anointed and filled with the Holy Spirit.

There are several passages of the Bible which are very hard to understand except for the fact that we do not see what God sees. God knows people's hearts, their motives, desires and character. Take Uzzah for example (1 Chr. 13:9-10). As we would see it, Uzzah simply tried to prevent the Ark of the Covenant from falling off the cart. What was wrong with that? But what was Uzzah doing there? The Ark was to be carried on long poles, on the shoulders of the priests, and the rest of the people were to keep their distance from it. What were Uzzah's motives? Pride, selfish ambition? Only God knows.

Take Ananias and Sapphira as another example (Acts 5:1-11). Just a couple of "small" lies! But they died because of their deception. What was in their hearts? What did God see that we don't see?

God's message to the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:15-18) shows more clearly the way God saw things, in contrast to the way people saw them! "You say 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realise that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked! Therefore I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and ointment to anoint your eyes so that you may see".

The Church in Sardis had a name for being alive, but God saw that they were dead! (Rev. 3:1).

Conversely, God saw the struggles, affliction and worldly "poverty" of the church at Smyrna and yet He declared that they were rich! (Rev. 2:9). Oh to be rich in the things of God, even if it means being poor in the world's eyes!

Seven churches. Eight times God says "Repent!" Seven churches which probably thought they were doing quite well, but eight "repents"! What is God saying to our churches today? "Well done" or "Repent"? What is God saying to *me* today? "Well done" or "Repent"?

God knows us even better than we know ourselves. "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it? I, the Lord, test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings" (Jer. 17:9-10). That's why

we need to ask God to reveal to us what is really in our hearts; what our character is really like, in His eyes, rather than ours.

The awesome responsibility of free will

God has given us the awesome responsibility of free will. He has given us the ability to choose – even to the extent of disobeying Him! God leads, guides, prompts, teaches, reveals His will and His ways. He says “Come, follow Me” – but the choice is ours! We can follow the ways of the world or the ways of God. We can appear to be great in the world’s eyes, or we can be truly great in God’s eyes.

The true disciple will do his utmost to please God rather than people.

Sin, transgression and iniquity

The difference between sin, transgression and iniquity has been likened to shooting an arrow at a target:

- **Sin** is missing the mark, while trying to hit the target.
- **Transgression** is a premeditated, determined aiming of the arrow in the wrong direction.
- **Iniquity** is like shooting a crooked arrow – it cannot hit the mark, because it is bound by its own crooked nature to miss the mark.

A disciple will sin and miss the mark from time to time, even though he aims to please God and do what is right. By repentance and confession that sin is cleansed and we continue our walk with the Lord.

Transgressions should not appear amongst the true people of God, for they are a deliberate sinning against God – rebellion, springing from a flawed character.

Iniquities are dealt with at the cross when we first come to the Lord. Sinful bondages are broken by the Blood of Christ, our “arrow is straightened” and we now aim straight – straight for the target, even if sometimes we do fall short.

Even the twelve men Jesus chose and called to be His disciples were not perfect, but they heard His call, “Come, follow Me” and obeyed. And as they followed, step by step, throughout their lives they became more like their Lord and Master (with the exception of Judas Iscariot).

Like David the Psalmist, we need to pray the prayer of Psalm 139:1-18 and especially verses 23-24. “Search Me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!”

QUESTIONS

1. Why do people (even Christians) spend so much time on their outward appearance and so little time on developing their inner character?
2. Why did Jesus spend so much time, in Matthew 6, emphasising the doing of things “in secret”?

3. Why did God choose David, not Eliab, to be king of Israel?
 4. Looking back over the past 24 hours, about what things would God say to me “Well done” and about what would He say “Repent”?
 5. Why is free will an “awesome responsibility”?
 6. Am I a true disciple of Jesus Christ? How can I tell? Is my heart set in the right direction? (Psalm 139:23-24).
-

7 The Blessings of Discipleship

The cost of discipleship

To be a true disciple of Jesus Christ will cost us all we have. Jesus warned His disciples “If anyone wants to follow Me, let him deny his own desires and take up his cross and follow Me” (Mark 8:34-38). He told them that they may have to leave their homes, friends, careers; it may cost them their possessions and their lives – **but** it is well worth it! “Count the cost”, Jesus said (Luke 14:25-33). Make up your mind, and then don’t turn back! (Luke 9:62).

In essence, following Jesus will cost us our:

- **Time.** Following the Lord may involve a real sacrifice in terms of our time, because it tests our selfishness and our real desire to love and serve God and other people.
- **Money and possessions.** Putting God first, and other people second, may involve the giving or use of “our own” resources in a sacrificial way, to help others and to help further the Kingdom of God. This is why we cannot serve God and money (Matt. 6:19-24). We need to hold lightly to our material possessions, being grateful for them but willing to use them as God directs.
- **Effort.** A lot of effort may be required in serving the Lord and other people. While we might want to be comfortable and “take our ease” there are many times when a sacrifice has to be made and we need to make a real effort to be obedient.
- **Obedience.** The follower of Christ has, as their aim, to be like Him. “Be holy, even as He is holy” (1 Pet. 1:15-16). The world can sin all they like. Some (carnal) Christians may do many things which are displeasing to God and are a hindrance to their Christian walk. But the true disciple will seek to do what pleases their Master, at all times.
- **Priorities.** “Seek first the Kingdom of God ...” (Matt. 6:33). This will inevitably involve a re-ordering of our priorities. What the world says is important may not be

important at all! Even the flesh will fight against our desire to follow Him and put Him first.

Besides these things, there will be opposition and maybe even persecution, from people, from the powers of darkness which are opposed to the things of God, and even our own “internal” thoughts and struggles as we do battle to be obedient to what God asks of us – is it all worth it?

It’s not all bad! In fact, it’s not bad at all! Yes, it means death to selfishness, self-centredness, personal ambitions and goals. But there are many blessings to discipleship too!

The blessings of discipleship

When we are following Jesus in the way He asks us:

1. We will have a deep sense of joy, peace and well-being, knowing that we are doing God’s will. It is wonderful to know that we are in the centre of God’s will – there is no better place to be, no matter what the cost!
2. We will know in our hearts and spirits that God is saying “Well done, good and faithful servant – enter into the joy of your Lord”. To know this **now**, as well as hearing it said on the Day of Judgement, is a great blessing!
3. We will experience God’s ways of rewarding His disciples. God has His ways and means of showing His delight in those who follow Him and seek to be obedient to His will. These ways are often **not** physical or temporal, but spiritual and eternal. God can bless us with prosperity, healing and health, but His spiritual blessings are even more wonderful – hearing His voice; knowing His pleasure; experiencing His love, encouragement, blessings and comfort; knowing His presence; knowing Him and His ways; being led by His Spirit and seeing answers to our prayers. These things are **infinitely** more valuable than worldly wealth and prosperity!
4. We will know the great joy of loving, worshipping and serving a truly wonderful God. What a joy to be a disciple of the greatest Teacher and Master who ever lived – Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, the Messiah and soon-coming King!
5. We will know that we are “running the race” and will receive an imperishable prize (1 Cor. 9:24-25; Phil. 3:7-16).
6. We will know the reality of the promise: “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things [everything you need] will be given to you” (Matt. 6:33).

We are not all called to “full-time Christian work or ministry” but we are told “Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

So, though the way may be tough at times, though other Christians may be content to live shallow lives of partial commitment, though the world has much to offer us (at least, to offer our flesh), there is truly no better way to live than to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ, Who Himself is the Way, the Truth and the Life!

QUESTIONS

1. What costs are there to being a disciple of Jesus Christ?
2. What does it mean to “take up our cross and follow Jesus”?
3. What are some of the costs you have seen personally, in being a follower of Jesus?
4. What are some of the blessings of being one of Jesus’ disciples?
5. Is it all worth it? Why?
6. How can we encourage more Christians to be true disciples of Jesus?

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