

* The Heights Baptist Church * Series: Discipleship *
* Topic: The Definition of a Disciple * Scripture: John 15:1-8 * 6/16/24 *

MAIN POINT

A disciple is someone who is growing in their relationship with Jesus and helping others to do the same.

INTRODUCTION

What are some ways that the word “follow” is used in our culture today? What kinds of things do you follow? (Think: sports teams, the news, people on Twitter, etc.) Why do you follow those things?

How would you define “disciple?”

Several good definitions and attributes could be given. Today’s lesson will look further into this question.

The Heights is starting a sermon-series called “Be a Disciple. Make Disciples.” One of the first things Jesus did in His earthly ministry is calling a group of people to follow Him to be His disciples. One of the last things Jesus told his disciples while on earth was to go and make disciples. For the next nine weeks, we will be looking at what it means to be a disciple and to make disciples, ideas about how this is accomplished, and specific methods disciples are being made at the Heights.

UNDERSTANDING

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 28:18-20.

What six elements did Christ include in his great commission to his disciples?

Note to study leader: Consider listing these six items on the white board as people list them.

1. All authority on heaven and earth has been given to Jesus.
2. Go.
3. Make disciples of all nations.
4. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
5. Teach them to obey everything Jesus has commanded us.
6. Jesus is with us always, to the very end of the age.

All six elements are important. If any of these are removed, then the church’s mission is compromised.

Why are the first and last elements on this list vitally important to carrying out the great commission?

The disciples were told by Jesus in Luke 24:49 to wait for the power God will provide before commencing their commission. Acts 1:8 tells us the Holy Spirit is the source of our power as witnesses for Christ. So, it is only through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit that we will be successful in making disciples.

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

In order to make disciples of all nations, it would be very helpful to understand what a disciple is. This is the purpose of our lesson today as we kick off a nine-week series on discipleship. We’re going to start by looking at what “disciple” meant to the disciples at the time Jesus walked the earth.

1. Definition

Bible dictionaries give the following definitions of “disciple” (Greek “mathetes”, pronounced math-ay-tase’).

- A learner or pupil (Strong)

- One who follows one's teachings (Thayer)

2. Historical Context

An important part of interpreting a verse correctly is to consider what the verse would have meant to its original hearers. Here are some thoughts as to what Jesus' disciples would have thought of when they heard the word "disciple".

Jesus was called "rabbi" sixteen times in the gospels. Rabbi means "teacher", or "master". So to be a disciple of a rabbi, a person would be placing themselves under a teacher or master as a submissive student, with the goal of serving under them while learning from them and emulating their behavior.

A Jewish rabbi's main role would be to help his disciples know, interpret, and apply the scriptures to their lives. At the time of Christ, this mostly meant helping the disciple know how they were to obey the Law of Moses. For example, the Law says to Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy... On that day you shall not do any work. But the law doesn't specify exactly what constitutes "work". So, the religious leaders came up with their oral tradition that defined work, effectively putting a fence around God's law, helping prevent the people from violating God's law. "Am I allowed to light a candle on the Sabbath? If so, how many?" Etc. Etc. One of the major lessons Jesus taught his disciples was that the religious leaders had gotten completely off base on their interpretation of the Law. True worshipers must worship in Spirit and in truth.

Note to study leader: For more information on the roles of rabbis and disciples in the first century, see renew.org/rabbis-and-their-disciples... and bible.org/article/being-first-century-disciple.

TRAITS OF A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 4:18-22

What traits of a disciple of Christ are seen in these verses?

- They immediately left their boats, nets, and their father and followed Jesus. A disciple of Christ quickly leaves the entanglements of this world behind to follow Jesus.
- Jesus told them that if they followed him, he would make them fishers of men. This wasn't so much a command here, as it is a promise. Disciples of Christ will be involved in reaching people for Christ.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ JOHN 13:34-35

According to these verses, how will someone recognize that we are a disciple of Christ?

They will know we are Christ's disciples, if we love one another.

A midshipman at the Naval Academy named Tim Powers came to Christ through the active witnessing of Christians at the academy. He later shared his testimony, saying the main thing that drew him to Christ was seeing these Christians' love for each other. By this he realized their relationship with Jesus must be real.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ JOHN 15:1-8

According to verse 8, what is one evidence in our lives that show we are a disciple of Christ?

If we are attached to the vine, we will bear much fruit. Bearing fruit demonstrates that we are Christ's disciples. Apart from Christ, we can do nothing.

What do you think it means to "abide in Christ"?

"Abiding in the vine then comes to be nothing more or less than the restful surrender of the soul to let Christ have all and work all, as completely as in nature the branch knows and seeks nothing but the vine."
Andrew Murray, "The True Vine", Chapter 9.

What kinds of fruit do we produce as Christians while abiding in Christ, the true vine?

Other people (Matthew 4:19, John 12:24), growing in Christlikeness (Galatians 5:22-23), and good works (Matt. 7:16, Eph. 2:10). (Note that good works are the fruit of salvation, not the root of salvation).

SUMMARY

Pastor Shay Osborne provides us with this definition of a disciple at the Heights Baptist Church, we want to give you a definition that is biblical and you will be able to repeat and commit it to memory:

'A disciple is someone who is growing in their relationship with Jesus and helping others to do the same.'

That's it. Does that include everything that a disciple does on a daily or weekly basis? No.

Will we need people to walk with us to unpack the ways that we live this out? Yes.

Does it summarize the essence of what a disciple of Jesus is? Yes.

1. Has a relationship with Jesus
2. Growing in their walk with Jesus.
3. Helping others to know Jesus and grow in their walk with Him.

This definition also allows us, as a church, to have a consistent definition that can be taught from our Children's Ministry all the way through our Adult Ministries. I know what the goal is and I can remember it."

APPLICATION

From today's passages, where do you need to recommit and/or re-examine the way you are living in light of the fact we are to be disciples of Jesus Christ?

What can I do at The Heights to get more involved in Christ's great commission to make disciples?

PRAYER

Pray that God would enable us to follow Jesus without reserve. Ask the Father to reveal areas in our lives that may be hindering us in our walk with Christ, that we might submit those areas to Him. Ask Him to renew our commitment to being a disciple who walks alongside other disciples and helps make new disciples.

COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 4:18-22

4:18-22. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen (all involved in a family business) living in Capernaum or nearby Bethsaida (see John 1:44). This was apparently also the home of Matthew at the time of his calling (9:1,9), and of Philip and possibly Nathanael (John 1:43-45). The fishing profession in that day probably carried with it the same kind of social stigma that “common laborer” does today. Three of the four (Peter, James, and John) would become Jesus’ closest earthly friends. And Andrew played a significant role in his ministry more than once (Mark 13:3; John 1:40; 6:8; 12:22).

Matthew left his readers with the impression that this was Jesus’ first encounter with these four men. However, John recorded that some of the Twelve (at least Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael) had been with Jesus during his earlier ministry (John 1:35-51; 2:2,12,17; 3:22; 4:1-2,27-33). Jesus had known his disciples for some time and had even seen them in ministry situations. Thus, their decision to follow him was not hastily made.

However, this does not decrease the significance of their commitment. In fact, quite the opposite. These men, in well-reasoned decisions, left both career and family to follow Jesus. And their confidence in him was such that, when he called, they all came at once (4:20) or immediately (4:22). They literally dropped their nets and left the boats in which they were standing. James and John left their father standing with his boats.

When Jesus said, Come, follow me (4:19), he was calling these men to a new career. In keeping with his skill as a teacher, he used terminology that would inspire them because of its relationship to their life experience. These men knew how to fish—for fish. So they had some concept of the task to which he was calling them. However, even though they had some familiarity with the concept of fishing, Jesus would still need to transform them into fishers of men. And that is the point of most of the teaching that follows, including the Sermon on the Mount— Jesus taught his disciples! He trained the Twelve whose names would one day mark the foundation “stones” (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14) of the New Jerusalem!

You will notice as Matthew’s Gospel unfolds that, while Jesus did not ignore the crowds, he was primarily engaged in teaching the Twelve. Even when he ministered to the thousands, it was in the context of teaching the Twelve. For example, the feeding of the five thousand, while compassionately providing food for thousands, was about his attempt to impact the Twelve (Mark 6:30-44).

The one condition necessary to their becoming fishers of men was to follow me. Packed into this two-word command are many implications. Jesus was saying, “Live with me and learn by watching me. Own my values and priorities. Learn to become passionate for the things I live for. And follow my example by doing the ministry I have come to do.”

MATTHEW 28:18-20

28:18. Matthew noted that Jesus came near or approached. Here was no case of mistaken identity. The disciples could look Jesus in the eye and see that this One was the same Person whom Pilate had arrested. They could hear the voice clearly and know it was the voice they had listened to for several years. Jesus’ claim made the need for decision even clearer: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” The kingdom Jesus talked about (4:17) had been established. The King had received authority to reign. This kingdom far exceeded the size of the Roman Empire. Only God could make such a declaration. Only One who ruled in heaven as well as on earth could claim such power.

28:19-20. On the basis of His authority, Jesus issued the Great Commission. Disciples had to accept the authority if they were to accept the commission. The commission is intricately formulated in the Greek. Stated somewhat literally as translated from the Greek language, the Great Commission reads as follows: “Therefore, having gone, disciple all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep (or to persistently obey) as much as I commanded you. And look here, I am with you all the days, until the completion (or perfection) of the age.” The introductory “therefore”

connects the Great Commission to Jesus' authority established in verse 18. The phrase "having gone" assumes obedience to the Commission. This phrase is not so much a call to go as it is a command to do certain things on the way. Disciples who recognize Christ's authority have one major task. The only imperative verb form in these verses formulates that task. Disciples under Christ's authority disciple the nations. That is, they share the gospel and help believers grow in Christ. Building the church by discipling the nations expands the disciple's journey. It sends them to the nations. Here is the universal nature of the gospel made explicit and clear. Disciples under Christ's authority must leave their comfort zones and the people with whom they feel at home. They must expand their horizons to incorporate every nation of people on earth. The church must devise plans and strategies to use the talents, gifts, energies, and resources of every one of its members. Every member must be on the move, discipling the nations.

In addition to going, discipling involves two other actions. The first is baptizing, which is to occur only after a person has acknowledged Jesus, the risen Savior, as his or her personal Savior. Baptism incorporates the new believer officially into the church. Baptism is also one means of making a public confession of faith. Baptism pictures or symbolizes what Jesus did and what the new Christian is doing. Jesus died for our sins. He was buried in the tomb. God raised Him from death to life. Baptism also pictures the believer's having died to sin and being raised to a new life in Christ, a life that is eternal through the ages.

The second action in discipling is teaching. This instruction reaches back to the earthly ministry of Jesus. It takes every parable, every sermon, every word Jesus said and teaches them to the church. It seeks to develop Christlike individuals. The teaching ministry begins with the New Testament accounts of the life and death of Jesus Christ. It expands to the rest of the New Testament and then incorporates the Old Testament as the foundation of who God is and what God planned long before He sent Jesus to fulfill Old Testament prophecies. This entire Word of God is the curriculum each disciple is charged to teach to new believers.

JOHN 15:1-8

15:1. "I am the true vine" is the last of Jesus' seven "I am" sayings in John's Gospel. "True" contrasts Jesus with OT Israel. Joseph was called a "fruitful vine" in Gen 49:22. The reference to the Father as the vineyard keeper harks back to Isaiah's first vineyard song, where God is depicted as tending His vineyard, only to be rewarded with sour grapes (Isa 5:1-7; cp. Ps 80:8-9).

15:2. Three types of believers are named or inferred in this first part of the chapter: those who bear no fruit, those who bear some fruit and, later in verse 5, those who bear much fruit. The fruit-bearing branches, it would appear from the text of this verse, represent true believers. But to whom does the text refer when it says, he cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit?

Other verses in the New Testament clearly teach that our salvation is not based on works, so the branch that doesn't bear fruit and is burned is not teaching that we need to bear fruit or else we lose our salvation (1 Cor. 3:14-15). As to what kinds of fruit we can bear as Christians, perhaps Galatians 5:22-23 sheds light on this: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." We also read that Jesus' disciples are to be fishers of men (Matt. 4:19), so fruit may include leading others to Christ, or anything we do with our lives to serve God. The fruitless vines that are cut off and burned may refer to false professors who don't really have a relationship with Jesus.

15:3. The disciples, however, had already been cleansed by the Lord's word.

15:4-6. Another key here is the word remain (abide) which appears eleven times in the passage. It seems to suggest resting in the Lord, confident in the promised strength he provides to the true branches.

Furthermore, John used the word remain forty times in his Gospel and twenty-seven more times in his epistles. In the context of this passage, it seems to emphasize an ongoing faith and loving obedience to the Father and the Son that results in fruit. The fruit in this passage seems to focus on spirit-generated behavior of Christians, though again this is not the only interpretation. Many sermons have been preached on emphasizing fruit as other people who have been influenced by the gospel.

15:7. Jesus added a specific dimension to the mutual abiding of the Christian life (v. 7). He set forth the condition that His words abide in believers. On the basis of this condition, He made the promise of fruitful praying. An abiding life is an obedient life. My words abide in you points to a willing acceptance of Jesus' authority as expressed through His teachings and commands. Words that remain ultimately become words that are obeyed. Whatever you wish defines the possible agenda of a believer's praying. The agenda is unlimited. Any concern is a proper subject for prayer. We can pray for anything that Jesus desires and for which He would ask the Father.

15:8. When followers of Jesus bear much fruit, God receives glory. Since believers cannot bear fruit of themselves but only by means of Christ's indwelling life, their fruitfulness is a manifestation of divine life. It thus glorifies God and serves as evidence of genuine, vital discipleship.

2 TIMOTHY 2:1-2

2:1. Having just shared his disappointment over the growing apostasy spreading through Asia, Paul turned to Timothy and wrote, You then, my son, be strong. Difficult circumstances, our own weaknesses and fears, and the negative attitudes or unfaithfulness of others should not determine our course in life. Just as Paul wrote of the power which comes from the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 1:7), so now he wrote of the strength which comes from Jesus Christ.

No doubt Timothy knew, as Paul did, that he could not find adequate strength within himself to fulfill the responsibilities thrust upon him on to endure the hardships ahead. Our confidence and ability to live successfully as followers of Christ comes when we are strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Paul knew that God's grace not only saves us; it enables us to carry out the life of faithful obedience.

2:2. Our own relationship with Christ Jesus must be developing in trust and dependence before we can expect to influence others for his kingdom. The perpetual strength of God's grace would enable Timothy to fulfill his tasks. Timothy must not only guard the gospel; he must take the gospel and the apostolic instructions (things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses) and entrust [them] to reliable men.

Unlike the false teachers who claimed special revelation or secret knowledge, Paul's message stood in accord with all Scripture and in agreement with the apostles. What he received from the Lord he passed on in an open manner (1 Cor. 11:23). Likewise, Timothy received no inside information from Paul. The message was widely known, spoken of freely and before many witnesses.

In his assignment to entrust the gospel to other people, Timothy needed to observe in these believers the quality of adherence to God's truth. Reliability and trustworthiness in remaining true to the gospel were prerequisites.

Timothy must also seek those who evidenced a knowledge and ability to teach others. Paul warned to establish people of godly character who possessed the aptitude for relating divine truth to everyday life, for clarifying ideas, and for maintaining purity in their instruction.