

WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

Discipleship Message #4

Review: We have been studying what the Bible has to say about discipleship being our life's Mission.

- Making disciples is our Mission as individual Christians and it is our Mission as a church (which is why there is no better sermon series to preach first as we start Harvest Baptist Church).
 - ✓ We defined our purpose: To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.
 - ✓ We discovered our Mission: To be and make disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ (by doing this we fulfill our life's purpose: we glorify God and enjoy Him now and forever).
- Last week we defined what a disciple is: It's a Christian (a born-again believer; a sinner who has turned *from* sin in repentance and turned *to* Christ in faith).

This biblical definition of *disciple* will now help us to define *biblical discipleship*.

- Since the term *disciple*, in the Book of Acts, refers to a true believer (a Christian), then *discipleship* refers to ***the process that believer goes through to becoming like Jesus*** because...
 - ✓ (Luke 6.40) The disciple goes through a growth and learning process to become as his Master.
 - ✓ (Rom 8.29) The Christian goes through a process of being conformed to the image of Christ.
 - ✓ (Eph 4.11-15) The saint goes through a maturing process to become like the Perfect Man, Jesus.
- Discipleship, then, is as we have said before: The normal Christian life because it is the “norm” that God expects from all His children (it begins with the new birth and continues with spiritual growth/maturity).

What does the Bible say about *discipleship*—about becoming godly (becoming like the Lord)?

- This morning we're going to take a quick tour of *discipleship* as it is presented in the Bible.
- We're not going to trace the word “discipleship” but rather the concept of becoming like the Lord.
- We are going to see that *discipleship* (the process of growing in spiritual maturity in order to be like the Lord in character and conduct) is not a new concept at all.
- Discipleship, in its most general terms, is God's work of restoring His image in lost man.

I. Discipleship in the Old Testament

- Obviously there is not the emphasis on discipleship in the Old Testament that we see in the New, so we don't want to *overstate* it. However, the concept does exist, so we don't want to *overlook* it either.

A. Discipleship on a *National* Level in the Old Testament

1. Remember our definitions: A *disciple* is a believer committed to becoming like his Master, and the process of becoming like his Master is called *discipleship*.
2. (Lev 11.44-45; 19.2) In the very same way that Jesus desired for His disciples to become like Him, so God in the Old Testament desired Israel to be like Him: Holy in character and conduct.
3. The very same pattern of *discipleship* that we see the New Testament disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ can be seen in the Old Testament nation of Israel:
 - a) God initiates a new relationship with fallen, sinful man by **calling** him *from* sin *to* obedience and growth in godliness (God-likeness).
 - b) Man's right **response** to that call is *repentance* and *faith*, a commitment to *forsake* self and *follow* God by submitting to and obeying His Word.
4. The nation of Israel, as God's called-out, covenant people, was to follow Him to be like Him. They were, in a sense, to be His “disciples” (following Him as Master in order to become like Him).

B. Discipleship on an *Individual* Level in the Old Testament

1. First, we see the national discipleship being lived out by individuals as they chose to follow God.
 - a) (Num 32.11-12) Joshua and Caleb “followed” the Lord (like Jesus said, “Follow me!”). We could say that Joshua and Caleb chose to be “disciples” of the Lord—followers of God.
 - b) (1Kg 14.8) David is another who “followed” the Lord with all his heart and walked (lived) in the ways of the Lord by submitting to and obeying the Word of God.
 - c) The Bible also speaks of Hezekiah (2Kg 18.1-6) and Josiah (2Kg 23.3) as being men who were committed to following God and obeying His Word.
 - d) The personal commitment of these individuals is very similar to what we call discipleship.
 - (1) God called the nation to follow Him in order to be like Him: Holy. The individuals of that nation would, as “disciples” of the Lord, follow Him in submission and obedience.
 - (2) That is the essence of discipleship: It is the process of following the Master to be like Him.
2. Second, we can see a few (not many, but a few) master-disciple relationships in the Old Testament.
 - a) For example, Moses trained Joshua in much the same way Paul trained Timothy (and expected Timothy to train others). It is very similar to what we call “personal discipleship” today.
 - (1) We need to be careful with this “personal discipleship” model, though, because it is very similar to what we see in Jesus' training of the Twelve: *leadership development*.
 - (2) The whole nation was involved in “Old Testament Discipleship” (being like the Lord), and only a select few participated in these close, “training” relationships. They were leaders.
 - (3) But, the concept is there and it's similar to the discipleship we see in the New Testament.
 - b) This same kind of master-disciple relationship can be seen also seen between Elijah and Elisha, and possibly even between Jeremiah and Baruch.

C. Conclusion: Even though we do not see the word “disciple” very much in the Old Testament, the concept of discipleship is clearly seen.

1. God called out men and women, and a nation as a whole, to follow Him in submission and obedience (as a Master would a disciple) in order to become like Him in character and conduct.
2. These are the concepts that Jesus would later take and develop during His public ministry.
 - We could safely say that *Jesus' call to discipleship* (a call given uniquely to Israel during His earthly ministry) *was a reiteration and extension of what God offered Israel centuries before.*

II. Discipleship in the Gospels and Acts (first century)

- A. If you would like to do the study, you can see that the concept of discipleship existed among the Greeks and then later among the Romans. We're going to limit ourselves today to what the Bible says.
- B. (John 9.28) Many Jews called themselves “Moses' disciples” (this is basically the “discipleship” we see in the Old Testament—the Jews called following the Law “discipleship”).
- C. (Mark 2.18) The Pharisees also had “disciples.”
- D. (Mark 2.18) The same verse speaks of the “disciples” of John the Baptist. They would follow him, listen to his teachings, and learn from watching how he lived out those teachings in daily life.
- E. The fourth type of first-century, Jewish discipleship we see is that of Jesus.
 1. This is the discipleship that, after Jesus molded it and changed it, became what we see in Acts.
 2. The concepts of discipleship that we see in the Old Testament (and that existed when Jesus began His public ministry) go through a transition in the Gospels and become solidified in Acts as what we know today as “discipleship,” the life of a disciple of the Lord.

F. **Review:** Discipleship, in the most general terms, is God's work to restore His image in lost man.

1. God initiates this restoration by calling lost man to repentance and faith, then the saved sinner begins a life-long process of growing in holiness (godliness).
2. That process can be called “discipleship” because discipleship is the process of following the Master (His teaching and His example) in order to become like Him in both character and conduct.
3. So we can trace the concepts of discipleship through the Old Testament and see that Jesus basically issued the same call to Israel that God did through Moses: “Follow Me to be like Me!”
4. But what about discipleship after the earthly ministry of Jesus? What about Paul and the Epistles, because Paul never once mentions “disciple” or “discipleship” in the letters he writes to Christians.

III. **Discipleship in the Epistles: It's not there! ...or is it?**

A. **Acts 21.16 is the last mention of “disciple” in Scripture.**

1. That means that we don't see the word “disciple” even once in Paul's writings to the Church.
2. Many take that to mean that discipleship is not meant for us today, that it was something Jewish.

B. **Before getting into the details, let's make some very simple observations:**

1. First, discipleship terminology was still in use during the ministry of Paul as he evangelized and established churches (all the way up to Acts 21). So, even though Paul doesn't use the word “disciple” in his Epistles, the word was still in use when he wrote those Epistles.
2. Secondly, even though the word “disciple” is not mentioned by Paul, he most certainly wrote about the same *concept* as we see in the Old Testament and throughout the life of Jesus.
 - a) (Luke 6.40) Jesus clearly stated that a disciple is one who is in the process of becoming like his master. A disciple of the Lord is one who is growing in Christ to become more like Him.
 - b) (Rom 8.29) Paul refers to this very same process (without the term “disciple”) when he clearly states that God's ultimate goal for all born-again believers in the Church is that we be conformed to the image of His Son. It's the same concept we see in Luke 6.40: *Discipleship*.
 - c) Luke 6.40 and Romans 8.29 establish the link between “explicit discipleship” in the Gospels and Acts, and similar concepts in the Epistles.
3. But, why the absence of explicit discipleship language and terminology in Paul's Epistles?

C. **The terminology of discipleship changed with Paul because discipleship itself had changed.**

1. Obviously the overall concept of discipleship did not change (it's still becoming like the Master), but discipleship before Acts looks a lot different than discipleship during and after Acts.
 - The Major Difference: The physical presence of the Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. The change in Jesus' presence among His disciples meant a change in the idea of discipleship.
 - a) Jesus' physical presence among His disciples has been replaced by three things:
 - (1) The Scripture: (2Tim 3.15-17) We do not have the complete, perfect, sufficient Word of God.
 - (2) The Spirit: (Acts 2.1-4; 2Cor 3.18) We have the spiritual presence of Christ's Spirit.
 - (3) The Saints: (Eph 4.11-16) We have the local church, the local congregation of believers.
 - b) These three elements work together in the plan and purpose of God to make disciples through evangelism and edification.
 - c) These three elements also necessitate a *change in discipleship terminology* for the Church.
3. Because the dynamic of discipleship underwent a change, so discipleship terminology did also.
 - a) Because Christ is not physically present, becoming like Him cannot be accomplished by spending time with Him (by following *Him* around, listening to *Him* and watching *Him*).

- b) Becoming like Him is now accomplished in a slightly different way, so we see different terminology referring to the process of discipleship, namely “imitation” (“following men”).
 - (1) This is why the Epistles do not use the word “disciple”: We are *not* disciples of the men we follow. We are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - (2) But, because the Lord is not here, He has placed men in His stead, men we should follow.
- c) By “imitation” or “following men”, we mean to refer to the process of transferring a lifestyle from one generation to the next, just like a master would with his apprentices.
- d) This concept of “imitation” or “following men” is what we see over and over in the Epistles:
 - (1) (1Cor 4.16) Paul exhorted believers to be “followers” of him (to do and live as he did).
 - (2) (1Cor 11.1) One of the best verse on practical discipleship in the Church Age: The concept centers around “imitation”—following a man in order to learn how to follow Christ.
 - (a) Through *Scripture* we received the instruction we need so we know what God expects.
 - (b) Through the *saints* we can see real-life examples of how to live out that instruction and become what God expects—we have examples we can follow in order to follow Christ.
 - (c) Through the work of the *Spirit*, applying the Scripture and using the saints, we are conformed day by day into the image of Christ.
 - (d) We require *both* the *instruction* and the *example* (both learning and imitation).
 - (3) (Php 3.17) We need to follow the example of believers who are more mature than we are.
 - (4) (Php 4.9) We *hear and learn* the instruction of other men (as they teach Scripture); we *receive and see* their example (as they live out the Scripture). We *do* what we *see* in them.
 - (5) (1Thes 1.6-8) As we follow (imitate) other more mature believers, we ourselves eventually become good examples that less mature believers can follow (imitate) to serve the Lord.
 - (6) (2Thes 3.7-9) Practical discipleship in the Church includes both instruction and imitation.

D. Summary and Review: After the ascension of Christ, discipleship changed and so did its terminology.

1. When Christ was on earth, He provided both necessary elements of discipleship:
 - a) Instruction: He taught His disciples personally.
 - b) Example: He provided the example He expected His disciples to follow/imitate and in that way apply the teaching He was giving them (“Follow Me: let me teach you... let me show you...”).
2. After Christ ascended from the earth, both necessary elements of discipleship are still provided to the Lord's disciples, but now they come through the Scripture, the saints, and the Spirit.
 - a) Instruction: We learn about Christ through the teaching, preaching, and study of the Scripture.
 - b) Example: We can see and follow (imitate) tangible examples of how to live out and apply the teaching of Scripture in other, more mature saints (“follow me as I follow Christ”).
3. The reason for the change in discipleship terminology is the change in the discipleship dynamic.
 - a) When Christ was on earth, He was the source of both the teaching and the example (therefore, all His followers were called “disciples”).
 - b) After Christ ascended, those two essential elements are still present but now they are *separate*; we do not have one unique source for both our teaching and our example.
 - (1) The teaching comes through the Scripture as taught by the Spirit through the saints.
 - (2) The example is given through more mature saints as they are filled with the Spirit and live out the Scripture.

c) Therefore, since we are (in part) emulating other believers (following them as they follow Christ, imitating their godly example), Scripture does not refer to us in the Epistles as “disciples” because we are *not disciples of the men we follow*.

- (1) We are called “saints” because God now sees us complete and holy and perfect in Christ.
- (2) And we are to “follow” other, more mature saints in order to make our *practice* in this world match our *position* in Christ—since we are *saints* we need to grow in *sanctification*.
- (3) This is the essence of discipleship in Paul's epistles: *Becoming* what we *are* in Christ.
- (4) And this “discipleship” is accomplished through:
 - (a) Instruction and imitation...
 - (b) Teaching and training...
 - (c) Exhortation and example...
 - (d) Speaking and showing...
 - (e) Learning (the Scripture) and following (the example of other more mature saints)...

Conclusion: What is discipleship?

***Discipleship* refers to the process of spiritual maturity through which a sinner becomes like his Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.**

- We are called by God to *be* disciples:
 - ✓ Are you receiving the instruction of the Scripture through Spirit-filled saints in a local congregation?
 - ✓ Are you following the example of other, more mature believers in order to grow in sanctification?
- We are called by God to *make* disciples:
 - ✓ Are you teaching others the Scripture (through evangelism and edification—teaching lost and saved)?
 - ✓ Are you providing others a good example that they can follow in order to live out the Scripture you are teaching them?

In our next message, we'll take this one step further because we need to talk about *discipling*.

- We know what a *disciple* is and we know what *discipleship* is. Now, what is *discipling*? And not only that, but *who* is responsible for *discipling*?
- After we clarify this last concept, then we're going to take a couple Sundays to look at just *how* we disciple others and just *how* discipleship happens today (how does God conform us to Christ and how do we participate with Him in that process?).