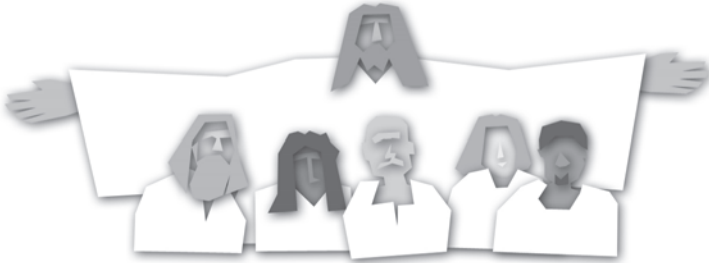


An Overview of Discipleship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 4:18–22; 10:24, 25; Mark 3:13, 14; 8:34, 35; Luke 14:25, 26.*

Memory Text: “As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people’” (*Matthew 4:18, 19, NRSV*).

Dwight E. Stevenson tells a story from the days of the conquistadors that illustrates an important aspect of discipleship. “When Cortez disembarked his five hundred conquistadors upon the eastern coast of Mexico, he set fire to the ships.”—Charles L. Wallis, ed., *Speaker’s Illustrations for Special Days* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1975), p. 25. As his warriors watched their means of retreat go up in flames, they knew that they were committing their lives to the conquest of the New World for Spain. They had to be totally dedicated to the mission.

In the same way, those who accept Christ and commit to the task of discipleship are called to burn their ships in the harbor. There is no room for retreat. There is no turning back. The motto of this complete surrender to Christ should be “forward ever, backward never.”

The Week at a Glance: What is discipleship? Who is a disciple? Can one volunteer to be a disciple? What are the requirements of discipleship? What is the essence of discipleship?

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 5.

Discipleship—Historical and Personal

In Scripture, the concept of discipleship appears in two ways, historical and personal.

In the historical Christian context it refers to the interaction *between* Christ, the Master Teacher, and His first followers, known as the disciples. At the core, it referred to those who had a close and special affiliation with the Rabbi from Nazareth, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

On the personal level, discipleship refers to the encounter that occurs between Christ, the transformed individual, and the world. It refers also to the challenges that Christian commitment brings and to the resultant life of faith. Thus, discipleship involves not only what a Christian does on behalf of Christ but how Christ is represented in the world.

It is here that the two aspects of discipleship, historical and personal, can intersect. Modern discipleship can benefit from the insights offered by the experience of the historical disciples and the Master.

Outline the concepts of discipleship found in Matthew 4:18–22. What did Jesus ask Peter and Andrew to do? Compare the call extended to James and John with that given to Peter and Andrew. What light does the response of these four disciples shed on our understanding of discipleship? *See also John 1:40–42.* What do these passages teach us, as well?

Read Acts 11:26. What insights does this give to us about the meaning of discipleship?

From what you have seen so far, what is your understanding of discipleship? What personal lessons can you take away from the few texts looked at today?

Who Is a Disciple?

The word *disciple* comes from the Greek word *mathetes*, meaning “learner,” “apprentice,” or “adherent.” It depicts a person whose mind is set on a purpose. In the New Testament, it is used mostly of Jesus’ disciples, especially in the Gospels. It refers to “an apprentice or pupil attached to a teacher or movement; one whose allegiance is to the instruction and commitments of the teacher or movement.”—Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1985), p. 222. A disciple, then, is a pupil or learner who is apprenticed to a master or teacher for the purpose of receiving instruction. There can be no disciple without a teacher. The New Testament term *disciple* is used primarily of Jesus’ disciples.

Discipleship involves willingness to follow commands and to make commitments. What does Jesus mean, and what is He calling for, in His statement to the crowds, “‘If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple’” (*Luke 14:25, 26, NASB*)? How are these words applied to us in our daily life?

If Christians are disciples, to whom are modern Christians apprenticed? Who should have the allegiance and commitment of Christians? The church? The doctrines? A charismatic preacher who does a good job of teaching and instructing? Or Jesus? What light does 1 Corinthians 1:10–17, especially verse 12, shed on this matter?

In the New Testament, a disciple was one whom Jesus taught and who was committed to following Him. Is it any different today? Read again Jesus’ words in Luke, as quoted above. How well does that picture fit you? Are you truly a disciple of Christ? What does your answer tell you about yourself and your commitment to the Lord?

How Does One Become a Disciple?

Read Mark 1:19, 20 (see also Matt. 4:18, 19). What do these texts tell us about how people became followers of Jesus?

In most instances in the New Testament, disciples were chosen; that is, they were called by the Lord, and they responded to the call. In other words, one doesn't make oneself a disciple. Instead, one becomes a disciple by responding to a call.

What do the following texts say about this topic?

Mark 2:13, 14

Mark 3:13, 14

Luke 5:8–11

John 1:43

Acts 9:4–6

These texts show that the initiative for discipleship in the historical situation did not rest with an individual. It resided with the Master. Each disciple responded to a call the Lord extended.

Even the response to the call Jesus extended did not wholly reside with the called. This, too, involved a divine initiative. “ ‘No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him’ ” (*John 6:44, NIV*). Discipleship indeed is a work of grace. God provided the means of salvation. He extends the call for us, and He woos us to accept. Can anyone doubt that salvation is all of grace?

The fact that you are even reading these words indicates the work of God in your life. How have you responded to the call of the Master? How do your works reveal the answer?

Requirements of Discipleship

From our study thus far, we can discern a few conditions for discipleship.

First, discipleship in the New Testament began with Jesus' call to people to follow Him. A response from those called was essential. Thus, willingness to follow must have been a requirement of discipleship.

Second, willingness had to be based on something concrete, on something the disciple saw as valuable. Did those called discern something in Jesus they had not previously seen in anyone else? If so, they exercised faith in Him to follow willingly.

The third requirement of discipleship is a natural outgrowth of the first two. Willingness to follow and faith to believe must have led to a positive response to His call to discipleship. Without a positive response there could be no discipleship.

A positive response and willingness to follow are ineffective unless put into active reality through obedience. Jesus invited each person initially called to follow Him, and they did so immediately. This means that they were obedient and that obedience was a requirement for discipleship. No willfully disobedient person can be a successful follower of the Master.

Also, in the case of the disciples, their response to the call implied a total break with the past. They left their jobs, their families, and their possessions to follow Jesus, and they heeded the call to love these things less than they loved the Master. Being a disciple doesn't necessarily mean that we have to do all those things, only that we be willing to, if needed.

What other requirements of discipleship can you find in the following texts? *Matt. 16:24, 25; Mark 8:34, 35; Luke 9:23*. What is the basic message that Jesus is giving to us here? How can you apply this principle in your own life?

The Essence of Discipleship

Implicit in the reality of following the Master was a call to a life of community and fellowship. Jesus and the disciples must have had a close companionship. That such a relationship is at the core of discipleship can be seen from His words in John 15:5, “I am the vine; you are the branches” (*NIV*). The intimate attachment between a vine and a branch that inspired Jesus’ illustration is noteworthy.

In John 15:9 Jesus compares their relationship with that between Him and His Father. He calls on His disciples to abide in His love, further strengthening this idea of our need to be closely attached to Him.

From each of the texts below, what else can we learn about discipleship?

Matt. 10:32, 33

Matt. 22:37–40

John 14:15

What is your understanding of Matthew 10:24, 25 and Luke 6:40? What do they illustrate about discipleship?

If discipleship, as previously seen, involves a clean break with the past, then out of necessity it must inspire a vision of the future. The disciple envisions being with the Master, learning from Him, and becoming like Him. Mark 3:14 says that disciples were called “to be with Him” (*NKJV*). There is no way that a disciple can be with Jesus and not learn from Him and not be inspired to be like Him. Moreover, they would also catch the vision of His kingdom and would desire to be part of it.

Do you sometimes feel discouraged in your walk with the Lord? Go back over the week’s lesson and see what you can find from the texts that can help you draw some encouragement and hope.

Further Study: Read *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 319, 322, 323, 374, 484, 582, 584, 585, 592–594, 738, 749, 750, 910, 1036, 1037, 1083, 1084; Ellen G. White, “We Have Found the Messiah,” pp. 139–143; “The Call by the Sea,” pp. 244–251; “He Ordained Twelve,” p. 292, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“No mere theory of truth or profession of discipleship will save any soul. We do not belong to Christ unless we are His wholly. It is by halfheartedness in the Christian life that men become feeble in purpose and changeable in desire.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 50.

“Matthew ‘left all, rose up, and followed Him.’ There was no hesitation, no questioning, no thought of the lucrative business to be exchanged for poverty and hardship. . . . So it was with the disciples previously called.

“When Jesus bade Peter and his companions follow Him, immediately they left their boats and nets. Some of these disciples had friends dependent on them for support; but when they received the Saviour’s invitation, they did not hesitate, and inquire, How shall I live, and sustain my family? They were obedient to the call.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 273.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What is the difference between discipleship and church membership? Why is it important for us to know the difference? In what ways can a person be a church member and not be a disciple?
- ❷ Read the second Ellen G. White reference above. At one level, the meaning is clear: We must be wholly devoted to Jesus, no matter the personal cost. At the same time, how is this principle open to abuse? In what ways could this idea be used by someone to evade what are, really, God-given responsibilities? How can we know the difference between being committed and using commitment as an excuse for some other agenda?
- ❸ What does it mean to be committed wholly to the Lord? What are the practical and positive ways commitment and discipleship can be manifested? Also, ask yourself this question: How are the lives of those around me improved and helped by my faithfulness to the Lord?
- ❹ What does it mean to deny self and take up your cross? Though we always tend to think of this command on an individual basis, would this also be words to your local church, as a whole? If so, how so?

Fishing for Souls

by GABRIEL ZANCHIOR

A friend stopped by the bar and dance hall that I operated in Benin, a country in western Africa, and invited me to his home for dinner. After eating I fell asleep and thought I was dreaming when I heard someone speaking beautifully. I opened my eyes and saw my friend and another man praying. The prayer was so beautiful that I knelt beside them.

When the man finished praying, he apologized for waking me. I asked him to teach me to pray as he prayed, and he said, “When you know God personally, praying is easy.” He was a pastor and offered to teach me about God.

As I studied the Bible with the pastor, I realized how little I knew about the Bible. I told my friend, “You have known this, and you didn’t tell me?”

Surprised, he responded, “But you own a bar. How could I know that you would listen to these things?”

As I studied the Bible, I realized that to follow Jesus I would have to give up my bar and dance hall. But these truths were so beautiful, how could I not follow them? I walked away from everything I had invested in the bar and turned my life over to Christ. My wife and I were baptized.

I found work as a fisherman, but fishing was poor in Benin, so I went to neighboring Ghana to work. While there I found the Adventist church and realized that this church was worldwide.

When I returned to Benin, I looked at our little chapel and our handful of members. I realized that the challenge was huge. Voodoo worship and witchcraft permeate life in Benin. People prefer to join a church that allows them to mix their voodoo practices with Christianity rather than stand up for the truth and become a Seventh-day Adventist.

I started evangelizing my town, calling people to Jesus. Ten people joined the Adventist church. But when trouble comes, staying in the church becomes difficult. In our culture funerals include drinking and offering gifts to the gods to assure that the dead person does not haunt family members. But when we Adventists don’t take part in these ceremonies, our families make it very difficult.

I now know that God’s church is a worldwide family. I pray, and I ask you to pray, that God will work powerfully in Benin to convince people of His love and power.

I continue casting God’s net in the devil’s sea, seeking to be a fisher of souls for Christ. Your mission offerings will help the work in my country grow stronger each day.

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