

Hands up, disciples!

A fresh new look at a Christian privilege

“Disciples.” They are mentioned well over 200 times in the gospels. About half of the New Testament is directly about disciples!

Learner ... pupil ... student.

That’s the core meaning of the Greek word *mathetes*, the word translated “disciple”.

If you’re a disciple, your chief characteristic is that you are here to learn. Not to instruct. Not to take command. Not to display your knowledge. But to learn. You are *not* a scholar—but you are becoming a scholar, because you are following and studying a master.

We find little about discipleship in the Old Testament. The word disciple and the idea of discipleship spring into life with Jesus. If you want to find out how to be a disciple, get into the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Followers

Discipleship begins with an invitation from Jesus—“Come, follow me.”

Follow *me*. Disciples don’t follow a system, an institution, a theory, an idea, a philosophy, or a collection of truths. They follow a Person. “I am the way and the truth and the life,” Jesus declared. John 14:6. “Follow *me*.”

Peter, Andrew, James, John—these are fishermen who get the invitation from a man

walking beside a lake. Matthew is differently employed. He receives the invitation at his tax collector’s booth.

These people are all busy working, with no unusual plans for the day. But a strange energy stirs them. They surprise themselves. “Follow me”—and they do!

Not for one minute do they discuss, argue, or hesitate. Drawn mysteriously by Heaven, they drop their fishing nets and papers. They leave their business in a moment, and commit to follow Jesus.

“We have left everything to follow you!” they testify later. Matthew 19:27. They do not leave for a two-week mission trip or a three-month study experience. It’s a change-of-life decision. When they leave, they *leave!*

The New Testament word for *following* means to get up from the normalcy of everyday life so you can walk on the same road with somebody else, as a learner and a supporter. “Anyone who serves me must follow me. And where I am, my servant will also be.” John 12:26.

Following is no casual thing. It means to leave behind your present reality and accompany a master teacher into a new reality, as a day-by-day disciple. “Levi got up, left everything and followed him.” Luke 5:28.

What about believing? Believing is a start, but believing does not always lead to following.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, many church leaders see his miracles and believe in him. But they keep it to themselves. If they publicly admit that they accept Jesus, they’ll be thrown out. Two things—fear and pride—keep their belief superficial, and stifle their call to discipleship. John 12:42–43.

Disciples don’t follow a philosophy. They follow a *Person*.

Copyright © 2012 by Ed Gallagher (john524goodnews.org). Photos are separately copyrighted, used under license.

Scriptures reflect or are directly quoted from the NIV: Holy Bible, New International Reader’s Version®. Copyright ©1995, 1996, 1998 by International Bible Society www.ibs.org. All rights reserved worldwide.

Recognition

What is this mysterious force that leads people to follow Jesus? It's the voice of the Shepherd, connecting to instinctive recognition in the minds of his listening sheep.

"His sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger. . . . My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, and they follow me." John 10:4–5, 27.

Jesus' disciples follow him into homes, gardens, synagogues, towns, cities, desert roads, side trails, mountains, boats, storms, crowds, hillsides, and foreign places. They follow him in the daytime and the nighttime, the heat and the cold, the times of popularity and the times of threat.

They are not following a stranger. They follow with a listening attitude. They recognise their Shepherd's voice. They have learned to know and trust their leader, so they are willing to follow him wherever he goes.

Sinners

What's notable about the invitation from Jesus is that he does not select the *right* people. "I have not come to get those who think they are right with God to follow me. I have come to get sinners to follow me." Matthew 9:13.

Sinners. As commonly used, it's a disparaging word. It refers to people on the outside of the church, or at least on its fringes. Crude fishermen; callous tax collectors. People who see themselves as unaccepted and unacceptable.

It's not a promising mix. These are not the kind of people who will make it through a typical rabbi's discipleship screening process.

Because of their approach, Jesus and his disciples get grief from the professionals. "You're not teaching what we teach! You haven't been through our training system for rabbis! You're not following our time-honoured rituals and practices! You're not abiding by our worship rules!"

The opponents — driven by the finest motives of institutional religion — spy on Jesus, set traps for him, criticise him, and prepare to eliminate him. They engage their



battle with a self-righteous war-cry — "We are disciples of Moses!" John 9:28.

Jesus responds with the relentless courage of a prophet and revolutionary. "These people honor me by what they say. But their hearts are far away from me. Their worship doesn't mean anything to me. They teach nothing but human rules." Matthew 15:8–9.

Action

Jesus' teaching is driven not by theory, but by experience.

Look what the 12 disciples do! They join Jesus at a wedding and watch, amazed, as H₂O becomes the best wine. They feed thousands of people from a single boxed lunch. They see a man blind from birth get perfect vision. They stand in awe as a victimised woman who is about to be executed gets rescued, restored, and completely forgiven.

They see proud churchmen rebuked, while children and lepers get welcomed.

They experience a killer storm calmed in a moment to save their lives and build their faith. They see a dead man rise from his coffin during his own funeral procession. They watch as a man deceased for three days walks out of his tomb.

They see a man paralysed for decades get healed — followed by teaching they've never heard before: "Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He will not be found guilty. He has crossed over from death to life." John 5:24.

They themselves go out and rebuke demons, heal the sick, and bring hundreds into faith and discipleship for the Master.

What a way to learn.

Pain

The 12 disciples are excited. Get rid of the Romans. Set up a new authority. Make us the 12 rulers. Bring it on!

But Jesus will not bring it on. He's not talking glory, he's talking crucifixion. Peter hates this death-talk from Jesus. He drags his Master to the side, scolding him. "Never, Lord!"

In one fierce moment, Jesus turns to Peter with the words, “Get behind me, Satan! You are standing in my way. You do not have in mind the things of God. Instead, you are thinking about human things.” Matthew 16:22–23.

Human things, not God things. It’s a rebuke from the Rabbi that’s a lightning bolt to the heart of the disciple.

Jesus is not into public relations and marketing. He speaks plainly about the pain of discipleship. He explains the cost of following him wherever he leads.

Back with the rest of the 12, Jesus makes use of the teachable time. “If anyone wants to follow me, he must say no to himself. He must pick up his cross and follow me. If he wants to save his life, he will lose it. But if he loses his life for me, he will find it.” Matthew 16:24–25.

Jesus is not into public relations and marketing. He speaks plainly about the pain of discipleship. He explains the cost of following him wherever he leads. Family, marriage, business, money, and life itself must be submitted to the Kingdom of God. “Your heart will be where your riches are.” Luke 12:34.

In planning and in philosophy of life, “you must give up everything you have. If you don’t, you can’t be my disciple.” Luke 14:33.

In the case of John the Baptist, discipleship at first brings fame, but ultimately brings lonely incarceration and an unthinkable execution.

Is there something wrong with John’s spirituality, that he comes to this shocking end? No! Jesus calls him the greatest person on Earth. Luke 7:28.

Joy

Jesus is not a rock star leading a fan club. He is a self-sacrificing general who is leading an army. His goal is not to dispense passing pleasure, but to secure and provide ultimate joy. Hebrews 12:2.

The General tells it like it is. “What I’m about to tell you is true. You will cry and be full of sorrow while the world is full of joy. . . . Now it’s your time to be sad. But I

will see you again. Then you will be full of joy. And no one will take your joy away.” John 16:20, 22.

Humility

A disciple is *a learner, a pupil, a student*. This is the foundational meaning of the word “disciple”.

To be a learner, you must be aware you have a lot to learn. You must be convicted that no matter how much education you have, you fall short in wisdom and knowledge. This is humility, the opposite of pride. If you lack humility, you can have no discipleship.

Jesus’ 12 disciples struggle to remain humble. More than once, he catches them arguing about who is going to have the highest spots in the new Kingdom. Jesus identifies this kind of thinking as secular and sinful. *That’s the way the world acts*, he says. *But it’s not the way I want you to act.* Mark 10:43.



Jesus stands a child among them. Wide-eyed, innocent, unassuming. He takes the child in his arms. *Like this child!* he declares. “If you want to be first, you must be the very last. You must be the servant of everyone.” Mark 9:35.

If we hear someone say, “These people have nothing to teach me” or “She doesn’t deserve the role she’s been given”, we’re hearing someone who has not learned humility, someone who has yet to discover the heart of a disciple.

Obedience

Obedience is an unpopular concept today. Even churches don’t often teach about obedience—it’s a lot easier to talk about freedom.

But Jesus calls for obedience, and declares that obedience is the only path by which disciples will come into freedom. “If you obey my teaching . . . you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth. And the truth will set you free.” John 8:31–32.

Love

Humility and obedience—two core attributes of disciples. Now here’s a third: “You must love one another, just as I have loved you. If you love one another, everyone will know you are my disciples.” John 13:34–35.

The opposite truth must also be acknowledged. If we don’t love one another, everyone will know we are *not* his disciples.

Arguments, bickering, division, fighting. When congregations become known for these characteristics, discipleship has been eradicated. Without transformation, these congregations will best serve the Kingdom of God by closing their doors.

Reward

The pain of discipleship is offset by the reward of discipleship. In childbirth, there’s pain. But how quickly pain disappears when a new baby is held! John 16:21.

Even as Jesus rebukes his 12 disciples for craving human glory, he assures them the time will come when he will in fact reward them by placing them gloriously on 12 thrones—but they must be patient until the day when he makes all things new.

“Everyone who has left houses or families or fields because of me will receive 100 times as much. They will also receive eternal life.” Matthew 19:29.

Circles

Disciples are called into a variety of contexts. Genuine discipleship lies sometimes in narrow circles and sometimes in wide circles of mission and strategy—according to Jesus’ decision.

“Anyone” can follow me, says Jesus. *If he or she wants to*. This is the wide circle of discipleship. An open invitation, available for all. The gospels tell us that *many* people followed Jesus. To the religious establishment, it looked like “the whole world” was following him. John 12:19.

But when Jesus’ teaching turned tough, many turned back. They came to a point in their journey where they made a decision to be disciples no longer. John 6:66.

There’s a time when Jesus identifies a circle of 72 disciples and sends them out. And at the time of Pentecost, 120 disciple-believers are gathered. Soon that number becomes crowds—large numbers—and it grows exponentially from there.

Back at the commencement of Jesus’ ministry, 12 are called to full-time, intensive training as disciples. These comprise the special-forces mission. Often, they separate themselves from other followers; they talk and learn in private with Jesus.

Three of these 12 are called to an exceptionally narrow, inner circle—Peter, James, and John. They ask Jesus questions in private. They follow Jesus into a dead girl’s bedroom, and see the girl come back to life. They witness the transformation of Jesus on a mountain top, and hear the voice from Heaven—“This is my Son, and I love him. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!” Matthew 17:5.

One of these three is called even closer—John, “the disciple Jesus loved”. It’s a circle of two. A mystery of pure, intimate friendship that no doubt brings superb comfort and encouragement to Jesus.

At the Last Supper, John leans on Jesus’ chest, sensing the exquisite sorrow of his heart. At the Cross, Jesus commits the care of his mother into the hands of John. After the crucifixion and resurrection, it is John who defies danger to be the first of the disciples to arrive at the tomb.

Graduation

“Jesus finished teaching his 12 disciples.” Matthew 11:1.

There it is. A completion point of some kind. The carefully selected 12 were on an intensive course, not a never-ending course. They remain disciples and learners, but their classroom expands. They’ve reached a transition when a new action stage begins.

Discipleship is not about always absorbing and never producing. Disciples are students, but not professional students. There’s purpose ahead. There’s advancement to a new level.

In John 15, Jesus describes a graduation. “I have told you everything I learned from my

Father.” Everything! It’s not possible to share *everything* and stay solely in a follower-teacher or a servant-master relationship.

So Jesus makes an astonishing declaration. “I do not call you servants anymore. Servants do not know their master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends.” John 15:15.

Friends. Close friendship is not theoretical or intellectual. It’s flat-out emotional. Disciples do not learn only facts about Jesus. Disciples learn about the heart of Jesus, and fall in love with that heart.



Production

“When you bear a lot of fruit, it brings glory to my Father. It shows that you are my disciples.” John 15:8.

What’s the fruit? Jesus describes it as a crop of new followers throughout the world—an

increase on investment of anywhere from 30 to 100 times, in Heaven’s dreams and desires! Matthew 13:23, 38.

Disciples find and make other disciples. The first thing Andrew does is to find his brother Simon, and bring him to Jesus. Then there’s Philip. No sooner has Philip found and followed Jesus, than he finds Nathanael and sees him become a follower of Jesus.

At noon one day, a wicked woman by a well in Samaria finds complete transformation through Jesus. What’s comes next? She hurries into her town of Sychar—the same town from which Jesus’ disciples have just returned with nothing but food. (The disciples don’t care for Samaritan towns.) She persuades a good number from Sychar to come out to the well and talk with Jesus. They too believe, and find transformation. It’s the immediate fruit of genuine discipleship.

Jesus further describes the fruit in terms of blessing people simply for the sake of blessing them. Feed the hungry. Give water to the thirsty. Provide hospitality to strangers. Clothe the needy. Care for the sick. Visit prisoners. Announce freedom.

This is what Jesus did. So it’s what Jesus’ disciples will do. “Everyone who is completely trained will be like his teacher.” Luke 6:40.

Motives

There’s an important point about fruit. It is *fruit!* Natural result, like bananas from banana plants and apples from apple trees.

The godly actions Jesus looks for don’t come from self-centred effort and obligation. When they’re ripe and not rotten, fruits never spring from a need to earn credits for Heaven. As Jesus explains in John 15, fruits are the supernatural result of discipleship hearts *growing in union with their Master.*

The woman who pours perfume on Jesus’ feet does it not to earn his favour, but because she loves Jesus so much she can’t help but spend all she has to bless him. The 12 disciples are angry—“What a waste!” But Jesus rebukes them, and praises the woman. Matthew 26:6–13.

The spiritual production of genuine disciples is natural, not forced. It’s an outcome, not a cause. Disciples don’t manufacture goodness; they just do it. For disciples full of love for their Master, blessing the world is almost subconscious, subliminal.

Jesus conveys this in his description of final judgement. “Then the people who have done right will answer him. ‘Lord,’ they will ask, ‘when did we see you hungry and feed you?’ . . . The King will reply, ‘What I’m about to tell you is true. Anything you did for one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’” Matthew 25:37–40.

Disciples will do as Jesus did. “Everyone who is completely trained will be like his teacher.” Luke 6:40.

Danger

Here’s a shocker. Someone betrays Jesus, and it isn’t a jealous rival, a false prophet, or an infiltrator. It’s a chosen disciple, one of the 12.

But here's more shock. At the Last Supper, Jesus washes the feet of the traitor, and offers the blood of his covenant to forgive this disciple's sins.

Disciples are not automatic saints. They struggle. They fail. They sin. They grow. Even after Jesus' resurrection, Thomas won't believe until he physically touches the wounds of Jesus. When all the disciples see Jesus in Galilee and worship him, some still have their doubts. Matthew 28:17.

Three men designated by Jesus to stay awake and pray with him in his hours of suffering, ignore Jesus and go off to sleep. These three are *those* three—the trusted inner circle of Peter, James, John.

Then, one of the disciples publicly denies his Master with cursing—three times—during Jesus' most intense need for loyalty. This same man has earlier tried to kill a servant associated with Jesus' enemies. As we know, this is Peter (also called Simon), the one who promised "I may have to die with you. But I will never say I don't know you." Matthew 26:35.

But look at the patience of Jesus. "Satan has asked to sift you disciples like wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon. I have prayed that your faith will not fail. When you have turned back, help your brothers to be strong." Luke 22:31–32.

Continuation

After Jesus' resurrection, he has an encounter with his disciples by the lake. Falling into one-on-one conversation with Peter, Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you really love me?" Here is the essence of discipleship—not mental knowledge, but heart attachment.

"Yes, Lord. You know that I love you."

Then comes a simple command—"Feed my sheep."

Here is the third of three big tasks Jesus assigns to disciples. First, make more disciples. Second, relieve suffering in the world around you. And third, nourish those who follow the way, the truth, and the life.

As the conversation continues, Jesus warns Peter that hardship, and eventually death by crucifixion, will come his way.

With this in mind, Jesus speaks an echo from the past—the invitation for Peter to keep on doing what he began to do the first day when he fixed his eyes on Jesus—"Follow me!" John 21:19.

Future

Near the end of Jesus' time with his disciples comes a fascinating message.

"I have much more to say to you. It is more than you can handle right now. But when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. . . . And he will tell you what is still going to happen. . . . Everything that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Holy Spirit will receive something from me and show it to you." John 16:12–15.

In discipleship, there are a few finishing points, a graduation or two, some transitions along the way. But in the ultimate sense, disciples are always learners, always pupils, always students. There is forever something new to break out from Christ and his Spirit.

The rest of the New Testament tells the story. Pentecost and Spirit gifting ... the incredible mission of Paul ... the brand-new *in Christ* mystery ... the revelations of Jesus given to John.

There is so much that Jesus cannot squeeze into his three-year training school! But with Matthias replacing Judas, the special force of the 12 disciples gets recharged by the Spirit and joins with thousands more.

Together, the army of disciples maintain humility, obedience, and love—without which Jesus said they cannot be disciples. They keep on following, keep on learning, keep on producing fruit for the Kingdom.

They experience the joy of adventure—in this life, and in view of the life to come.

So ... raise your hand if you choose to be a disciple of Jesus today!

See also the companion articles, *Hands up, apostles!* and *Training disciples in everyday life*.