

How to become a "Disciple"

Throughout history, the word "Christian" has been so often misused, that most people have no concept of what the *Bible's* definition of the word really is. Perhaps it is for this reason - or in anticipation of it - that the Bible itself uses the word "Christian" only three times (Acts 11:26; 26:28; and 1 Peter 4:16). More often, the word "disciple" is used; for that word more accurately describes the relationship between Jesus and those whom the *Bible* would describe as genuine Christians.

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A disciple is someone who is learning to follow the ways of Jesus. A person *becomes* a disciple, a learner or follower of Jesus. He is not born one; nor is discipleship related to background, family heritage, society around him, a good nature, or anything else that exists inherently within him, or is a part of his environment (compare to John 1:12-13).

The process of becoming a disciple begins with a radical change in attitude, perspective and values - a total turnaround in the way one views reality. It ends with a radical change in conduct, actions and lifestyle - a total turnaround in the way one lives that reality. Together, these changes are what is meant by the word "repentance."

This change involves an acceptance of what Jesus said - words now recorded in the Bible. We believe Jesus, even when other "authorities" disagree with him. It also involves an acceptance of what Jesus did - also recorded in the Bible. We trust him for salvation, rather than relying on our own efforts or merit.

Genuine acceptance of what Jesus said, and trust in what he accomplished on the cross, will result in a willingness to obey him - to live life in a way that brings honor to him. We will become "salt" and "light" (Matthew 5:13-16) to the world, the people around us. We will have a positive influence - both by encouraging what is righteous, and by restraining what is evil. When Jesus has gripped our hearts, being "salt" and "light" becomes a part of our nature. We obey Jesus, not because we *have* to, but because we *want* to.

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A disciple accepts what God's Word says about Jesus. He accepts the Bible's testimony that Jesus has conquered death and, because of that, is now physically alive. He knows that, though Jesus is not physically presently right now, he will one day return to earth, and will judge the living and the dead. The disciple can look forward to that day; for Jesus is not only Lord (Master) and Judge, but Savior of all who have been willing to trust and obey him.

Being a disciple means a willingness to learn from Jesus a new way of life. The world's concepts of "right" and "wrong" often do not agree with what Jesus calls "right" and "wrong" - especially when we get to the heart of the issues. This means that, unless we are willing to learn from Jesus, we will *never* know what it means to be a disciple. On the other hand, if we *do* learn the way of Jesus, the

world will hate us, because (from *their* perspective) they will view us as opposing all that is proper and right. We do not have to pursue this opposition, for once we begin to live in a way that honors Jesus, the world will make sure that it comes.

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Disciples do not claim to have attained "perfection," but they desire to do so. This results in an ongoing struggle in their lives. This struggle can be *external*, brought on by the people around them, who would like them to turn back to their old way of life (the way of the world). It can also be *internal*, brought on by the inclinations and habits which they developed in the past, while they still followed their "old nature." But having become disciples of Jesus, they reject their old way of life. They accept the struggle that now exists between their new nature, and their old habits and practices.

The center of a disciple's focus is a desire to be like Jesus. This desire impacts his choices, and it influences the way he responds to sin and temptation. When he *does* fall into sin (and he will), he does not choose to stay in that sin. Rather, he repents of his sin and, once again, begins to follow Jesus. A disciple has an ongoing awareness of his neediness - his "spiritual poverty" (Matthew 5:3) - and it grieves him (Matthew 5:4). He knows that, by himself, he is weak; so he needs to rely on God for the ability to be a disciple.

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A disciple accepts the Bible's testimony about the way God works in his life. The trials and struggles of this present life may be great for the disciple. He may experience persecution from those who oppose him. He may have to endure grief, as he struggles against his own personal sins and failures. Yet as he contemplates the glorious future that God has promised him, he realizes that all of life's trials are insignificant, in comparison. He knows that even in those trials, God is working to strengthen and build him up (compare to Romans 8:28).

The disciple knows that God began a good work in him - a work that will continue into eternity. God has wonderful plans for his future, and he will use everything that happens in life (whether good or bad) to accomplish his plans (compare to Philippians 1:6). The disciple may see some aspects of this plan fulfilled in this present life, but he knows he has a lot more to look forward to - a glorious hope that rests on the solid foundation of God's promises.

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There are many passages in the Bible, which show us what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. The deepest riches of this relationship with Jesus cannot be fully discovered in an entire lifetime. Yet what is basic, what is needed in order to become and live as a disciple, can be found by anyone who is willing to accept what Jesus says. A good place to begin one's search is the "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5 - 7), in which Jesus gives us a basic explanation of what discipleship is all about.

In this "sermon," Jesus begins by describing the attitude, or perspective, a disciple has, and the way it begins to affect his life - Matthew 5:3-12. We do not have to "do" these things; these verses are not a list of commands. Instead, they describe changes that occur - changes in our heart and (as a

result) changes in the way we relate to God and to other people. These changes can occur only if we begin to pay attention to what Jesus says, and allow his words to impact the way we live. When these changes occur, they will begin to express themselves in and through us. We will become the "salt" and "light" Jesus talks about, in Matthew 5:13-16 - not because we *try* to become those things, but because it has become our nature to be those things.

Note that the first command in this passage occurs in verse 16. Jesus is telling us that, if we now have a new nature (one which causes us to be "salt" and "light"), we need to let that new nature show itself. A true disciple - someone who is following Jesus and learning from him - will obviously want to do this. (Otherwise, he *can't* claim to be following Jesus and learning from him!)

If these changes have occurred within us, we will want to live the life of a disciple - not because we want to "earn" discipleship (or because we want to work for God's favor), but because we want to live consistently with the new nature that is within us. (We also hate the old nature that once enslaved us.) Because of this, Jesus spends a major part of this "sermon," teaching his disciples how to live. Genuine disciples will want to live like disciples, but until Jesus instructs them, they won't know how!

An examination of Matthew 5 - 7 will reveal that much of what Jesus says is a reflection of the moral obligations found in the Old Testament. Though Jesus fulfilled many of the *ceremonial* aspects of the Old Testament law (through his death and resurrection), he reinforced the *moral* aspects of the law. He came, not to teach us to *break* the moral law, but to show us the true intent of that law. The people of Jesus' day (like many in every generation) had reduced the law to little more than a list of rules and regulations. Jesus showed us that the law was intended to impact even the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

When Jesus saves us, he changes us, so that the moral commands of the law are no longer a list of regulations directed toward us as an *external* restraint, an obedience that is forced upon us. Rather, he places the law in our hearts as an *internal* restraint, an obedience that has become the desire of our hearts. In the "Sermon on the Mount," he gives us instructions that will enable us to fulfil the desire he has put inside us - so that we will be able to do the types of things for which he created us (Ephesians 2:10)! "Works," or actions, will flow out of our salvation - but only because God has given us the ability both to desire and to do them (Philippians 2:13).

Many passages in the Bible tell us what we must do, to become disciples. We learn about topics such as repentance, trust and obedience. Many other passages tell us about the hopelessness of our condition (we are "dead in sin" - Ephesians 2:1), our inability to make the necessary changes, and our need for God to enable those changes. These two perspectives complement each other. Concerning the one perspective - our need for God's help - a disciple may sense that God is drawing him to Jesus, enabling him to do what he could not naturally do. Or he may realize it after the fact, as he contemplates the "impossible" changes that have occurred in his life. In either case, the other perspective - our need to trust and obey - will also be evident. A disciple knows he is responsible for his choices. He knows that the way of the disciple is the only right way - and he will choose to follow that way.

A disciple will step out in trust, aware of his need to follow Jesus. He will accept Jesus' definition of "sin" and "righteousness" - what they are and what they are not. He will believe what Jesus says about his need for salvation *from* a life of sin, and *to* a life of righteousness. He will trust Jesus for salvation, as well as for the ability to make the necessary changes in his conduct. He will endeavor to live a life of righteousness - a life that pleases his God and Savior.

A disciple will do these things; he will not deny his responsibility to do them. Nevertheless, at the Day of Justice, he will give all the praise and glory to God. This is because the disciple is keenly aware of his own weakness. He is also keenly aware of God's power, which makes his obedience possible.

In contrast to all this, there will be others at the Day of Justice, who are not disciples. Some chose to *not* believe, trust, or obey Jesus. Others, who did not know about Jesus, chose to live contrary to the knowledge of whatever truth they did have (Romans 2:14-16). At the day of justice, all of these will stand before Jesus and will give an account of their choices. They will be judged fairly and impartially, based only on what they knew - and on what they willfully chose to *not* know. In the end, they too, will admit that the way of the disciple is the only right way. But having chosen to live contrary to the truth they understood, it will be forever too late. Both the opportunity and the ability to change will be gone.

"Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong;
let him who is vile continue to be vile;
let him who does right continue to do right;
and let him who is holy continue to be holy."

Revelation 22:11

We must remember that it is *we* who have chosen to rebel against God. Every time we sin, we choose to go against the truth we have - whether it is truth given to us in the Word of God, or truth simply embedded in our conscience. Each sin reaffirms our rebellion against God.

God has no obligation to give us the opportunity to be saved. If he does, our accountability to follow him will be increased (Luke 12:48) - as well as the severity of judgment, if we reject that offer. Even if we refuse to pay attention to his offer, so that we never reach the point of understanding it, the very fact that he has made such an offer (and we refused to listen to it) will increase our accountability.

It is because of this, that we plead with you to make peace with God, if you have not already done so. You have been offered something that has more importance and value than anything this world has to offer, and we do not want you to throw it away. To do so would be a horrible tragedy - both now and forever.