

Discipleship: Following Jesus According to the New Testament

Introduction

The New Testament emphasizes discipleship as the core identity of those who follow Jesus Christ. This study explores the biblical call to discipleship, its cost, purpose, and challenges, grounded in Scripture. The term “disciple” (Greek: *mathētēs*, meaning learner or follower) appears over 250 times in the New Testament, far outnumbering the term “Christian,” which appears only three times (Acts 11:26; Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). This study clarifies what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and addresses the challenges of remaining faithful.

1. The Biblical Identity of a Disciple

- “Christian” vs. “Disciple” (Acts 11:19-26):
 - The term “Christian” was first used in Antioch to describe Jesus’ followers, likely by outsiders (Acts 11:26). It appears only three times in the New Testament, indicating it was not the primary self-identification of early believers.
 - In contrast, “disciple” is used over 250 times (e.g., Matthew 10:1; Acts 6:1, 7), emphasizing a learner who follows Jesus’ teachings and example.
 - Jesus defined discipleship through His life and commands, calling followers to obey Him fully (John 8:31-32).

2. The Purpose of Discipleship

- Jesus’ Call to Follow (Mark 1:14-18):
 - Jesus initiated His ministry by calling disciples to “follow Me” and become “fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). This call involved immediate obedience, leaving their former lives (e.g., nets, boats) to pursue His mission.
 - The purpose of discipleship is to share the gospel, drawing others to Christ, as modeled by Jesus (Luke 19:10).
- The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20):
 - Jesus’ final command is for all disciples to “make disciples of all nations,” baptizing and teaching them to obey His commands.
 - Discipleship is a chain reaction: disciples make disciples who make more disciples, forming the church (Acts 2:42-47).
 - Jesus promises His presence with those who obey this commission (Matthew 28:20).

3. The Character of Discipleship

- Love as the Mark of Disciples (John 13:34-35):

- Jesus commands disciples to love one another as He loves them, demonstrating their identity to the world.
- This love is sacrificial and practical, reflecting Christ’s example (1 John 3:16-18).
- Mutual Encouragement and Accountability:
 - Disciples encourage one another daily to prevent sin’s deceit (Hebrews 3:12-14).
 - They confess sins and pray for each other (James 5:16).
 - They teach and admonish one another with wisdom (Colossians 3:16).
 - They share material resources to meet needs (Acts 2:44-45; 1 John 3:17-18).

4. The Cost of Discipleship

- Personal Choice and Sacrifice (Luke 9:23-26; John 12:24-26):
 - Discipleship requires denying self, taking up one’s cross daily, and following Jesus (Luke 9:23).
 - This involves submitting to God’s will over personal desires, as Jesus prayed, “Not My will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).
 - Jesus illustrates this sacrifice through the metaphor of a kernel of wheat: “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:24). True disciples must “die” to self—letting go of worldly attachments—to bear spiritual fruit and multiply the kingdom.
 - Anyone who loves their life in this world will lose it, but whoever hates their life (prioritizing eternal values over temporal ones) will keep it for eternal life (John 12:25). Whoever serves Jesus must follow Him, and the Father will honor such servants (John 12:26).
 - Choosing Jesus may mean prioritizing Him above worldly gain or even family ties (Luke 14:26-27; Matthew 10:37).
 - Jesus warns that being ashamed of Him and His words leads to His rejection of us (Luke 9:26).
- Counting the Cost (Luke 14:28-33):
 - Disciples must consider the cost of following Jesus, ensuring they persevere to the end (Luke 14:28-30).
 - True disciples surrender all, viewing themselves as stewards, not owners, of God’s gifts (e.g., time, resources) (Luke 14:33; Romans 12:1-2, where believers are urged to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God).
 - Examples include contributing to the church’s work (1 Corinthians 16:2) and showing hospitality (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2).
- Perseverance in Trials (James 1:2-4; Hebrews 12:7-11):
 - God uses trials to test and mature faith, producing perseverance and holiness (James 1:12; Hebrews 12:10).
 - Suffering for Christ’s sake aligns disciples with His sufferings (1 Peter 4:12-16; Philippians 3:10-11, where Paul desires to know Christ and participate in His sufferings to attain resurrection), though suffering due to personal sin is not commendable (1 Peter 4:15).

5. Assurances for Faithful Disciples

- God’s Grace and Promises (Titus 2:11-14; 2 Peter 1:3-11):
 - God’s grace teaches disciples to reject ungodliness and live righteously (Titus 2:12).

- By growing in faith, virtue, and love, disciples confirm their calling and election, ensuring they will not fall (2 Peter 1:10-11).
- Abiding in Christ through prayer and obedience ensures His presence in us (John 15:4-5; Galatians 2:20, where Paul declares, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me").
- Avoiding Pitfalls:
 - A mere reputation for godliness is insufficient; God knows the heart (Revelation 3:1-3).
 - Human traditions must not replace God's commands (Mark 7:6-8).
 - Disciples must watch their life and doctrine closely to avoid hypocrisy (1 Timothy 4:16).

6. Overcoming Excuses and Fear in Evangelism

- Biblical Examples of Overcoming Fear:
 - Moses (Exodus 3:10-12; 4:10-14): Despite feelings of inadequacy and fear, God equipped Moses, promising His presence.
 - Gideon (Judges 6:11-16): Gideon's fear and sense of insignificance were overcome by God's assurance, "I will be with you."
 - Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-8): God rejected Jeremiah's excuse of youth, commanding him not to fear.
 - Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-8): After experiencing God's forgiveness, Isaiah willingly volunteered for God's mission.
 - Peter (Luke 5:4-11): Peter's awareness of his sinfulness led to trust in Jesus' call to "catch men," overcoming fear.
- Application:
 - God calls disciples to evangelize despite fears or perceived inadequacies (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).
 - Jesus' command, "Do not be afraid," empowers disciples to share the gospel (Luke 5:10).

7. Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus

- Perseverance in the Race (Hebrews 12:1-3):
 - Disciples run the race of faith with endurance, looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of faith.
 - The hope of eternal life with God motivates perseverance (Hebrews 12:2).
- The Gospel's Urgency (2 Corinthians 6:1-2):
 - The gospel declares that Jesus became sin for us, so we might become God's righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21).
 - Now is the "day of salvation," calling for an immediate response (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Discussion Questions

- What aspect of God's call to discipleship encourages you most?
- What do you anticipate as your greatest challenge in living faithfully as a disciple?
- Have you considered baptism as an expression of your commitment to follow Jesus? (See Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4.)

Practical Steps for Discipleship

- Timing of the Study: Introduce discipleship early for those with a biblical background or later for those needing to build faith (Acts 8:12). Avoid overwhelming new believers or excusing uncommitted attitudes.
- Evangelism: Share the gospel with others as part of discipleship (Mark 1:38; Luke 19:10). Make a list of people to invite to study the Bible.
- Baptism: Discuss baptism as the biblical response to faith, uniting believers with Christ (Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:26-27).
- Church Involvement: Engage in the church's mission through regular contribution (1 Corinthians 16:2), hospitality (1 Peter 4:9), and helping the needy (Galatians 6:10).
- Daily Self-Denial: Practice intentional acts of surrender, such as prioritizing time for prayer and service over personal comforts, to embody the "kernel of wheat" principle (John 12:24-26).

Conclusion

Discipleship is a lifelong commitment to follow Jesus, marked by obedience, sacrifice, and love. By dying to self, as Jesus teaches in John 12:24-26, disciples bear much fruit, multiplying the kingdom through evangelism and faithful living. The New Testament church grew explosively because disciples obeyed the Great Commission (Acts 2:47; 6:7; 16:5). By fixing our eyes on Jesus and relying on God's promises, we can overcome challenges, share the gospel, and remain faithful to the end.